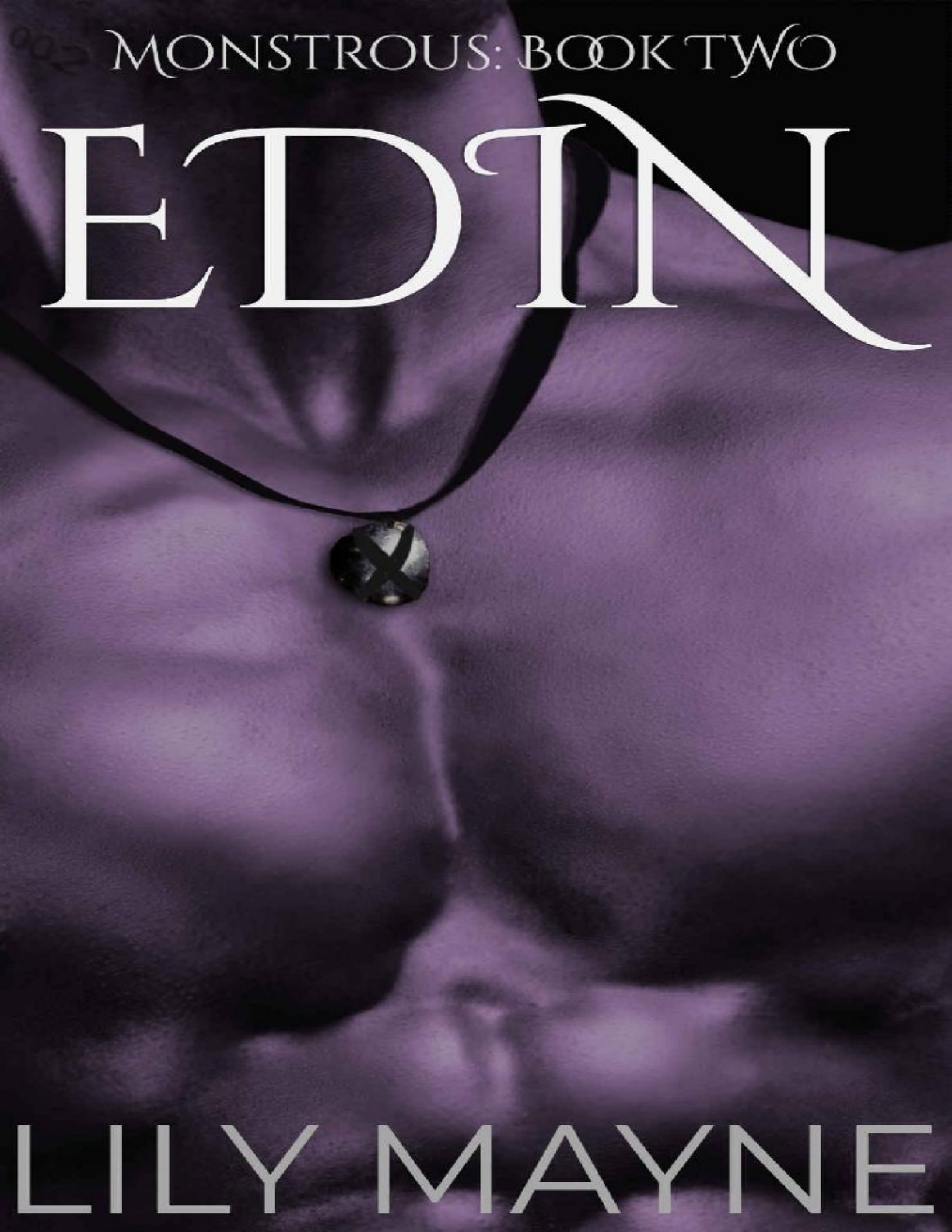
MONSTROUS: BOOK TWO
EDIN
LILY MAYNE

EDIN

MONSTROUS
BOOK TWO

LILY MAYNE

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Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Edin
Author’s Note
Monster Index
About The Author

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CHAPTER ONE

“Well, shit.”

I could only nod in agreement at my best friend Charlie’s blunt declaration. I stared, slack-jawed, at the charred, shattered remains of what was once the US military’s base in Nebraska.

The one where they’d held all the captured monsters.

I hesitated before taking a step forward, glass crunching under my boots. It was totally still and silent, no military personnel in sight. We’d thought it was worryingly strange when we’d approached the base’s perimeter and found no one guarding the thick heavy gates, which had been left open. No trucks coming and going. No soldiers manning the watch towers.

“Do we… go in?” I asked, unsure. “We don’t know if it’s secure. They kept the specimens here.”

Specimens were what the military called monsters. As in, the beings that had risen on earth about twenty years ago, from no one knew where, and started off a chain of events that saw the collapse of human civilisation as we knew it.

Now, the US population resided in abject poverty in cramped, dirty cities along the coastlines. The entire central portion of America had to be evacuated when the monsters came and the military started attacking—and quickly realised they couldn’t win with brute force. Now that land was known as the Wastes. Entire states abandoned and left to the monsters, as well as a small number of humans, known as raiders, who for some reason chose to live out here in this lawless, dangerous place.

“I guess we… have to go in and make sure there aren’t any, uh, injured left behind?” Charlie sounded as uneasy as I felt.

Taking a deep breath, I jerked my chin towards the wreckage and started walking, Charlie falling into step beside me. I was limping after our long walk, my prosthetic rubbing uncomfortably against the stump below my left knee.

“Looks like this didn’t happen recently,” I muttered, keeping my voice low just in case as we approached. “But be ready.”

Charlie and I had been in the military for twelve years. We hadn’t known each other before—we’d enlisted at the same time, gone through training

together at the same base, and became inseparable. It was fortunate that we'd managed to stick together throughout our military careers, and now we were part of a small, special unit that took on covert missions in the Wastes. Mainly monitoring monster hives, raider camps, or sometimes underhand activities happening in the coastal cities.

For the last few months, we'd been up in Minnesota monitoring a new raider camp, cut off from the rest of the military. Our pick-up hadn't arrived when it was supposed to, and after waiting for a week, we'd started walking. Now, it was becoming clearer why no one had come. We were normally stationed at the Tennessee base, but had been ordered to report in at the Nebraska base first when we returned. Which was what we'd travelled here first to do, only to find it… gone.

"What do you think happened?" Charlie muttered, gripping his rifle in steady hands as we reached the thick metal doors to the building. They were warped, bowing outwards. Like something—with mass—had rammed against them from within until they'd buckled under the immense pressure.

I swallowed behind my mask. "Not sure. Maybe one of the monsters escaped?"

Charlie made a disbelieving sound. "No way. Those cells were air-fucking-tight, ever since one of the first specimens they captured managed to get out."

I glanced over at him. "You've seen them?" Neither Charlie nor I had ever been stationed here, and I'd liked it that way.

He shook his head. "Owens was stationed here for a while. Told me what they were keeping *down in the basement*." He lowered his voice ominously, but still shuddered. "Fuck, man, they couldn't have paid me enough to keep me stuck here guarding a bunch of monsters."

I shrugged. "Luck of the draw that we've never had to, I guess."

We fell silent and edged inside the building, rifles cocked and ready. I looked at Charlie and signalled for him to lead. He could see my eyes, because we'd both ditched our headgear back in Minnesota before beginning the long trek here. Our tactical gear had had to go long before that, when the mission took longer than expected and we couldn't stand staying in filthy clothes anymore. The helmets, though, we'd removed because raiders who came across a pair of soldiers in the Wastes wouldn't hesitate to put a bullet through their skulls.

We'd kept our boots, but instead of my military headgear, I had on a plain dark green ball cap and a simple black mask covering the lower half of my face. Most everyone wore masks out in the Wastes—raiders tended to wear them to keep their identities hidden from the military, which meant we had to wear them so we didn't *look* like military. My grey, long-sleeved thermal top was a little tight, but it was fine. I had a couple spares in my bag. My black pants were standard, pretty much identical to our military-issued clothing anyway.

Charlie was dressed similar to me. Luckily, we hadn't gotten close to any raiders on our way here, because we couldn't have ditched our guns, and they were obviously top of the line, military-issued. Nothing like the twenty-year-old rust buckets raiders used out here. You had just as much chance of one of those things misfiring and shooting you in the gut as you did hitting your intended target.

Charlie looked back at me, grey eyes cool and calm like always. Not that we needed to see each other's eyes to communicate silently. We'd been doing this for over a decade. Charlie knew what I was thinking even before I did, half the time.

He pulled in front, rifle raised and ready, as we slowly stepped into the ruined remains of the building. It was totally silent but for the slow drip of a leak somewhere. Shrapnel, shards of concrete and dust crunched softly under our careful footsteps.

The walls were pitted with dents from bullets. And the flaking, dark brown splatters covering everything—that was definitely old blood. A lot of it. It didn't take long for us to come across the first of the human remains, but it was only half a person. A soldier. When I looked closer and realised where the other half of him had gone—thanks to the huge, jagged bite marks in the partially mummified skin—I understood why there weren't more human remains in here.

Something had eaten them.

I swallowed, but didn't say anything. Charlie had probably noticed it too, anyway. We really should have cleared the whole building before lowering our guard, but this place was gargantuan. It tunnelled deep underground, and I knew that they'd kept the monsters on the lowest floor.

We wouldn't be going down there.

When we'd determined that this floor was empty, Charlie nodded at me. We tentatively lowered our guns, but kept our fingers ready on the triggers.

“Okay, going to take a wild guess and say the monsters *definitely* got out,” Charlie murmured to me, keeping his voice low just in case.

I nodded. “Looks like it was a massacre. Makes sense why our ride never showed.”

“Kinda weird that they’ve just… abandoned the place, though. Don’t you think?” Charlie looked around, and I saw his eyes snag on a pistol discarded on the dusty floor. It had been crushed. By what looked like a fist.

I tried to come up a rational answer, but Charlie was right. It *was* strange. Especially as this was the place with the expensive cells used to hold the monsters. Didn’t they want to get it up and running again? “Maybe… it’s easier and cheaper to write the place off and set up somewhere new.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I could tell Charlie was no longer interested in the reasons why. He looked around us, posture wary. He lowered his voice to a barely audible murmur. “Feels like we’re being watched, Hunter.”

I’d sensed that too, the back of my neck prickling with awareness. “Let’s get back outside and work out our course of action.”

There were too many doorways and hidden spaces in here—too many places for something to lunge out at us. We couldn’t look in fifty directions at once, and we both knew well by now that the biggest mistake you could make when dealing with monsters was expecting them to act like humans. Some monsters could shapeshift. Some were impossibly fast. Some liked to cling to ceilings, hanging above you, just waiting for the moment to drop down onto your back.

Rifles raised and ready again—because the feeling of inhuman eyes on us hadn’t faded—we walked swiftly back to the main doors and slipped outside. “Definitely something still in there,” Charlie muttered once we were back in the harsh sunlight. The air was dry and smelled like old grass.

I nodded in agreement. We stood, keeping our backs to the wall of the ruined building, eyes trained on the entrance. “Safe bet that not many people survived in there.”

Charlie nodded, eyes tight. “How many were they keeping in there?” he asked, referring to the monsters, but then answered his own question. “Last I’d heard, at least a dozen.” His shoulders stiffened. “Wouldn’t want to be around when twelve of the most powerful monsters the military can capture get loose at once.”

Jesus. I couldn't imagine what it must have been like. And there were scorch marks all over the place, too. Blackened metal and warped glass and crumbling wood. Something must have caught on fire as well.

"What's the plan?" Charlie asked, glancing at me but keeping his eyes on the entrance, just in case.

I exhaled. "Head to the Tennessee base, I guess." I made a frustrated noise. "If we still had our headgear we could at least try and reach someone through comms."

"More walking," Charlie groaned, reaching up and scrubbing a hand through his short dark hair. He glanced at me again. "How's your leg doing, man?"

"Aches, but I'm good."

I'd lost the lower part of my left leg a few years ago. Nasty monster bite. Not only had it torn away almost all of my calf muscle, but the medics hadn't known if the monster's bite was venomous or full of bacteria, so they'd decided it was safest to amputate. At least the military had paid for a half-decent prosthetic. Didn't mean that endless walking across the Wastes didn't put bad strain on it, though.

"Let's get away from here and cover as much distance as we can before we find somewhere to hunker down for the night." Charlie jerked his chin back toward the way we'd come. "Ready?"

I nodded once. We both stepped away from the building, guns and eyes still fixed on the entrance. Nothing moved. I strained my ears for any hint of sound coming from inside the gutted building, but it was dead quiet. Just the dry grass rustling in a faint breeze around us.

There were several abandoned military trucks around the compound, and we found one with the driver's side door ripped off and the keys still in the ignition. Neither of us commented on the dried blood staining the paintwork around the missing door as we climbed in, Charlie behind the wheel so I could rest my leg for a while. I sighed in relief as I sat in the passenger seat, my stump aching from the constant pressure of rubbing against my prosthetic for hours. I knew it was past time I should have a new one fitted, but the military's generosity only extended so far.

Neither of us relaxed until we were clear of the military base perimeter. We had no idea how far the captured monsters had travelled after escaping. Maybe we were still driving through their territory, and they were watching, just waiting for the moment to pounce on the car. Charlie was vulnerable

without a driver's side door. Something could easily snatch him from his seat if it moved fast enough—and we knew damn well that there were plenty of monsters that could move fast enough.

At least the sensation of inhuman eyes watching us had faded after we left the base. It was too noisy to talk with the wind rushing in thanks to the missing driver's side door, so we drove in silence for a long time. We'd just crossed over into the very western tip of Kentucky when the truck ran out of gas. Even though I was the one with a missing leg, Charlie groaned like he was dying as he heaved himself out of the stationary vehicle, swinging his rifle and backpack over his shoulder.

I did the same, readjusting my cap and fixing my mask back over the lower half of my face. My leg felt better, but the moment we started walking, a dull raw ache flared in the stump just below my left knee. It needed an ice bath. Fat fuckin' chance of that happening out here.

"Should we try and find another car?" Charlie asked me as we trudged down the empty highway.

"We can try." There were plenty of rusted, useless cars piled up at the sides of the highway, from where the military had pushed them off the roads and out of the way. We were less likely to find one in working order out here. "Need to find supplies too." We still had a decent store of military-issued protein sticks and hydration packets, but they weren't infinite.

"Drive-thru?" Charlie teased, nudging me with his elbow.

One corner of my mouth lifted in a brief smile. We'd spent way too long on the walk down to the Nebraska base reminiscing about the fast food that we'd had only a few brief years of being able to experience as kids, before the monsters rose.

"I wouldn't turn down a burger and fries." I readjusted the strap of my rifle over my shoulder, trying to ignore the tell-tale raw rub of a forming blister on my stump. "Can't remember the last time I had real meat and not processed shit."

"And a milkshake." Charlie groaned. "I miss sugar."

I huffed out a short laugh. "What were those things that were supposed to be able to survive a nuclear apocalypse or something? They never went bad, apparently." I reached out and palmed Charlie's nape in an affectionate grip. "Maybe we'll find some of those."

He grinned. "I'll settle for one of those little packets of sugar meant for coffee at this—" He stopped. "Heard something." He was alert

immediately, cool eyes scanning the horizon to our left.

I followed his gaze, readying my rifle. “See anything?”

Charlie shook his head, keen eyes still staring hard at a low cluster of rocks a few hundred yards from us. I stayed silent, following his lead, but quickly swept my eyes around us to make sure nothing was creeping up from behind.

It was totally still and silent. Eventually, Charlie exhaled and lowered his gun. “Maybe it was just an animal.”

“Maybe.” I trusted his instincts, though. “Stay alert. Let’s keep moving.”

The Wastes were remarkably quiet as we walked for an hour or so until we came across a truck stop and scavenged for supplies. Charlie was able to get his sugar rush, finding an old squeezy bottle of honey and telling me that it was the only food that never spoiled.

He made his show of knowledge less impressive by squeezing some of it directly onto his tongue five seconds later. “You’re an animal,” I told him affectionately.

We shoved out of the store and back into the afternoon sun, Charlie already grumbling about having to walk. I started to answer him when I saw movement from the corner of my eye and swung my head in its direction instantly. I stared hard at where I’d just seen something dart out of sight behind the store we’d emerged from.

“Charlie,” I muttered, reaching back for my rifle.

I didn’t look away from where I’d just seen movement, but I knew Charlie was grabbing his own gun beside me, and the faint click of him turning off the safety followed just after mine. I wondered if something had stalked us since we’d abandoned the truck. Charlie had sensed something back there, but he hadn’t mentioned sensing anything following us since. There were plenty of monsters out here—it could easily be a different one. Or even a raider, though it wasn’t normal for them to travel alone.

We both held our breath when a faint scratching, rustling sound came from behind the building. We’d had encounters like this before, plenty of times, and we’d come to realise it was better to face it head on than risk being stalked and caught off-guard. There was always the risk that we’d face off against a monster that was too powerful for us to take down, but we’d been lucky so far.

I just had to hope our luck was still with us, even though things hadn’t exactly been going our way recently.

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CHAPTER TWO

As the rustling behind the building got more frantic, we took a few slow, cautious steps back. Better to get as much distance as possible, in case whatever it was lunged out in a rush. I could hear something similar to claws scraping against bricks, a rapid clicking sound, before silence fell, broken only by the breeze rustling the dry grass that butted up against the side of the highway's asphalt.

Charlie and I didn't move for a long moment. I glanced back to make sure nothing was creeping up behind us, but everything was still and silent.

Just as I was wondering if maybe it had just been a wild animal, Charlie's voice cut through the air, sharp and brusque. "Roof."

I swung my gaze and my gun up immediately, in time to see a dark shape with long, thin legs flying down towards me. A burst of gunfire sprayed from Charlie's rifle as I dove out of the way, narrowly escaping the cage of the monster's long legs as it thudded onto the concrete of the truck stop's forecourt. An indignant screech burst from the thing, and I could see a slow trickle of dark ochre blood oozing from a bullet wound beside its front right leg, but it wasn't enough to stop it.

I ran my gaze quickly over it, trying to work out if we'd seen one of these monsters before. Its four legs were like ant's legs, segmented and covered in hard bristles, ending with tiny claws that could grip even smooth surfaces. Its body was long and shaped like an ear of corn, covered in the same dark bristles over an exoskeleton that looked shiny—or wet. Its face was low between its front legs, long neck arching down in a curve as it snarled at us. Its eyes were solid black, rectangular and vertical, and so long that they wrapped up over the top of its skull. Its teeth were blunt like a human's, but thicker, crowding its wide mouth.

As the monster rose from the crouch it had landed in, its long legs meant that its low-hanging head was level with mine, even when it was on all fours. It was thin, but huge. I started lifting my gun to shoot, but it moved too fast, using those powerful back legs to launch at me as Charlie let out another burst of gunfire.

"Feint left, Hunter." Charlie's voice was calm even though he had to raise it to make sure I heard him over the angry wet snarls coming from the

monster's mouth. I followed Charlie's order, the creature lunging with me in anticipation, but at the last second, I dove right. My left leg buckled only briefly as I pushed my body off the concrete, but it was enough for one of the monster's long, bristly front legs to swipe out and catch on my shirt, trying to pull me closer as it shrieked angrily.

Charlie released another rapid burst of gunfire, and this time it made the monster jerk back and let out a pained snarl. It gave me enough time to raise my own rifle and start firing. With both of us sending concentrated gunfire at the creature, it didn't last long, letting out one last weak sound before slumping on the ground and going still.

We were both panting by the time we stopped shooting. After a minute of no movement, we clicked on the safety and slung our rifles back over our backs. My heartrate was slowing already—I was far too used to this shit; we both were. As the adrenaline pounding through my blood started to fade, I could feel a mild stinging on my abdomen. I looked down and saw a split in the fabric of my shirt. I pulled it up to get a better look, peering down at the faint, thin red line trailing down my abs, and let out an impatient sound.

Charlie peered at it as he wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his arm. "I'll get the antiseptic."

Even though it was barely bleeding, we didn't take chances with monster wounds—especially not since my leg. Of course, there was every possibility that the monster we'd just taken out was toxic and even a graze this minor would be enough to kill me. Guess we'd find out soon enough.

Automatically, my free hand rose to my face, fingers tracing absently over the long scar that ran all the way from my left temple and over my upper lip, pulling one side of it up into a permanent little snarl, before ending on my chin. I could still feel the jagged, needle-sharp claw of the monster trying to rip my face open. Another lucky near-miss. I'd had a few of 'em.

Charlie pulled the antiseptic out of the first aid kit in his bag and handed it over. "Thanks." I quickly dabbed some onto the wound and passed the tube back. "Think it'd been following us?" I asked, jerking my chin at the dead monster as I stripped off the ruined shirt. I tossed it in my bag and pulled a clean one out, quickly shoving it on. It was better to keep the scratch covered, just in case we came across anything else we had to kill. I wasn't particularly interested in getting monster viscera in any open wounds.

Charlie stuffed the antiseptic back into his bag. “Could have,” he said in response to my question. “Every chance it was living out here, though.”

I felt a stab of unease at the thought that maybe we’d disturbed its nest and it was just defending its territory. But it was too late now. And anyway, it had attacked first. Wasn’t like I was just going to let it take me down. I’d had to do this too many times already to start getting in my own head about it now. This was life out here.

I reached up to lift my ball cap briefly so I could swipe the back of my hand over my sweating hairline. “Ready?” I asked Charlie.

He exhaled roughly and nodded once. “As I’ll ever be in this hellhole.” As we started walking down the highway, he shot me a wry grin. “Reckon we’ll be lucky enough to find another car?”

I huffed. “You never know. We might.” Unlikely.

“Yeah, and maybe we’ll find a camp of friendly raiders serving those milkshakes,” Charlie grumbled, adjusting the straps of his backpack irritably. “There is actually a raider camp round these parts,” he then said. “I’ve seen the reports on them. Real nasty bunch.”

“Oh yeah?”

Charlie nodded. “They hijacked a couple of soldiers that were driving near their territory. Tortured them and left their bodies strung up on the military route that cuts through here and into Indiana.”

I whistled low through my teeth. “We better stay alert.”

“We’ll be careful.” Charlie glanced over at me, and I could tell he was grinning behind his mask. “This ain’t our first rodeo. We know what raider territory looks like.”

“Doesn’t make much difference if they’ve got any long-range weapons,” I muttered.

Charlie snorted. “How many raider camps do you know that have long-range weapons?”

I shot him a look, cocking an eyebrow. “I’d say it’s pretty good odds that the camp with balls big enough to hijack soldiers is going to be the camp with military weapons, dumbass.”

“Even so, it’s not like we typically travel with huge stockpiles of ammo. If they’d got hold of any good weapons, they would’ve used ‘em up quick.” Charlie shrugged one shoulder. “And that hijack was over a year ago. They might’ve even moved on by now. Or killed each other. Or died out.”

“Either way, let’s move fast and keep our guards up.”

I saw Charlie roll his eyes at me. “No shit, hoss.”

I reached over and shoved his shoulder. “And maybe less lip, you little shit.” I scrubbed a hand through his dark hair just to be annoying, my lip quirking when Charlie ducked his head with an irritated huff.

“I ain’t little, jackass,” he grumbled, but he was smiling. We’d had some variation of this teasing spat too many times to count. “You can’t just call anyone shorter than you little. *Everyone’s* shorter than you, you behemoth.”

I chuckled. He was right. Charlie wasn’t short, standing just under six foot. At six-five, though, I normally towered over everyone.

We fell into easy silence as we walked, both of us focusing more on our surroundings. Some raider camps were fairly peaceful. Well, it was more like they just wanted to be left alone, so they stayed out of the military’s way. There were some, though—evidently the one near here, going by what Charlie had told me—that had shaken off any lingering pretences of human civility. Pack mentality meant that one bad apple could easily spoil the whole bunch when life was already so cruel and merciless in the Wastes. It didn’t take much for humans to become little more than animals.

Luckily, we came across no signs of raiders as we walked for the next couple of hours. Maybe Charlie was right, and this camp had moved on or none of them were left. We were walking down the main street of a small town when we decided to scavenge for some supplies. If there *had* been a raider camp nearby, it was unlikely there was anything left, but we decided to look anyway.

The place was deserted, old trash skipping across the street alongside low swirls of dust. The buildings were derelict, windows smashed and doors hanging off their hinges. There was a diner down at the far end of the street, its once neon sign dull and sad-looking in the dusty sun. Charlie nodded his head towards it. “Gonna go check that out.”

I dipped my chin in a brief nod. “I’ll look in the pharmacy.” Maybe there’d be some pain meds left. My stump felt rubbed raw inside my prosthetic, even through the sock, and the scratch on my stomach itched, making me rub it through my shirt.

The day was hot, but the air inside the old pharmacy was cool thanks to the smashed windows. I was grateful for the shade, and removed my cap for a brief moment to wipe away the sweat at my hairline before shoving it back on. Raiders had definitely hit this tiny town at some point, because the majority of the shelves were wiped clean. I managed to find a single packet

of ibuprofen that had gotten kicked behind a display unit at the end of an aisle. We already had small first aid kits in our packs, so after another cursory look around I decided to join Charlie at the diner.

I was stepping back out onto the dusty street, my bag in my hands as I zipped it back up, when I heard his voice. “Hunter, watch out for—*fuck!*”

Rapid gunfire rang out, making my heart spasm. I dropped my bag to grab the rifle from my back, spinning towards the sound in time to see a small, greenish-grey skinned creature flying back and dropping dead to the ground, dark blood spurting from a bullet wound to the chest. But there were more of them, swarming around Charlie, several rushing up behind him and grabbing at his arms, snatching away the gun before he could fire again.

“Charlie,” I shouted as I started sprinting towards him. But I couldn’t get there fast enough, and I gritted my teeth hard as I watched the cluster of creatures surround Charlie and grab at him. I’d never seen them before; they had big mouths filled with shark-like teeth, ears so long they flopped down their spiny backs, and arms that ended with two long clawed fingers. They were scrawny looking, but had to be strong for their size. I could see Charlie’s muscles straining to get free but he couldn’t break from their grips.

Shit. There were too many of them, and they were too close to Charlie for me to try and safely pick them off with my rifle. I could easily hit him instead.

“Fuck,” I gritted out, almost tripping over my own feet as I tried to move even faster. The pain in my leg was gone, forgotten, sheer determination driving me forward.

Charlie was struggling, face red behind his mask and eyes slitted with fury. “Get the fuck off me,” he shouted, voice harsh. I could see the creatures weren’t actually hurting him, they were… apprehending him. A few of them had produced a thick, rough-hewn rope that looked like it was made out of plant matter, and they were winding it round his arms behind his back.

“Charlie,” I shouted, and his gaze snapped up to me.

But then those familiar eyes widened, and I saw him shake his head frantically. “No, Hunter,” he yelled. “Stop, there’s—” One of the creatures yanked a rope round his neck, cutting him off with a choked sound.

I couldn’t have stopped even if I’d wanted to. Momentum was driving me forward. There was no fucking way I was letting these monsters take or hurt Charlie.

I was so close. Just fifty yards away now. I kept my eyes fixed on my best friend, fear lancing through me when I saw the creatures start to forcefully tug on the restraints, causing Charlie to stumble back as he nearly lost his footing. He was still shaking his head, still shouting something at me, but I couldn’t hear him anymore. My blood pounded through my head, blocking out everything.

I was so close to him, so close—

And then the ground disappeared from under my feet, and I plunged straight down into darkness.

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CHAPTER THREE

"*Fuck*."

I clung on to the jagged end of a pipe that I'd only just managed to grab as I plummeted, legs scrabbling for purchase beneath me. Gravity made my prosthetic tug, making me feel even more imbalanced. I'd dropped my rifle as I fell. It had vanished into the darkness beneath me, but I couldn't even worry about that right then. I was more concerned with preventing *myself* from plunging into that endless black.

What the ever-loving fuck? Why was there just a giant fucking hole in the street? Was there some kind of huge burrowing sand worm down here?

"Charlie," I shouted, voice rough with panic. "Charlie!"

But he didn't answer. I couldn't hear much over the blood rushing in my ears, but it sounded like the monsters were gone. And they'd taken Charlie with them.

"*CHARLIE*," I shouted, half out of worry for him and half from desperation. Because if he was gone, there was no one around to help me.

And my hand was starting to slip off this pipe.

My heart raced, breaths sawing in and out of me, sucking my mask against my mouth. I chanced a look down, to see how far the drop would be or if there was anything I could reach for to break it. When nothing but looming darkness peered back, I started to panic more. My body flailed, nearly causing my fingers to slip loose from the pipe, so I quickly looked back up at the ring of daylight above me and tried to re-tighten my grip. Okay, looking down was a bad idea.

"Fuck," I breathed out, half-laughing and half-sobbing at the sheer gall of it. Of spending twelve years in the military fighting monsters, twelve years out in the Wastes, but meeting my end all alone in a fucking sinkhole in Kentucky.

I tried to find purchase with my boots against the side of the hole, but even if I could there was nothing to grab onto to climb back up. Loose dirt crumbled beneath my boot soles, falling into the darkness beneath me. My chest was heaving with panic, and black spots appeared in my vision when I looked back up at the surface in desperation. A part of me had already

realised that this was it. I wasn't getting out of this. There was no way I could—

A head—with horns—appeared, peering over the side of the hole, nothing but a silhouette against the bright sky behind it. A mixture of relief and apprehension flooded my limbs.

"F-fuck," I gasped. "Help me!" I yelled up, voice hoarse and wild with panic, survival instinct causing me to overlook the fact that this was clearly a monster, and it helping me out of this hole may not end up being the better option.

The head cocked. "Hello, human." Its voice was so deep that the irrational part of my brain worried for a second that it would make the sinkhole worse if it kept talking.

"Please help me." I tried to calm my breathing, to steady my voice. "Can you get me out?"

The head cocked again. "You want to get out?"

Was this monster stupid? "*Yes*, I want to fucking get out!" I paused, panting too quick breaths. "Unless you're going to eat me or something if I do."

A deep, rumbling laugh. "I don't want to eat you." The monster paused. "Well, I mean…" it then added in a contemplative voice. I saw its head peer further over the edge of the hole, as if it was assessing me.

Panic flared through me. "Look, please—I need to get out. I don't—I have to—My friend—" I was babbling in agitation, my pulse drumming hard in my throat. My hand was slipping. This monster may want to kill me, but if that was the case, either way I was dying. And I'd really rather not meet my end plummeting into a pitch-black hole. "P-please."

The monster paused for a second, before I saw those horns dip as it nodded. "Okay. I'll help you out."

The head vanished. I was sweating, trying to tighten my fingers around the pipe. I could feel them slipping. My prosthetic was like a weight tied around my ankle, tugging against me. I tried hard to keep my breathing calm and steady, but I had no idea if that monster was just fucking with me and had left me here.

But then a length of rusted old pipe was waving beside me. "Grab on," the monster said.

Heart pounding, I tensed my arms up, preparing myself. In a rush, I let go of the pipe I was hanging onto with one hand and grabbed the metal

length, ignoring the screaming pain in my shoulders. “That’s it,” the monster said above me, but I couldn’t lift my head to look at them, concentrating on keeping a tight grip. “Now the other hand. I’ll pull you up.”

I was doubtful, but if I could get purchase with my boots, maybe together we’d be able to slowly inch me back up. Screwing up my courage, my scalp sweating beneath my cap, I let go and grabbed onto the pipe, my heart spasming with fear when I dropped a few inches. “I’m on,” I shouted, voice rough with panic.

An instant later, I was sailing up through the air and into the sunlight, yanked out of that hole with impossible ease. I swallowed, trying not to flail my legs in panic. The monster must be incredibly strong to lift me so easily. I just had to hope they really *didn’t* want to eat me. I didn’t know if I’d be able to fight them off. Especially without my gun.

I was set on my feet too hard and stumbled, but quickly righted myself even as my stump throbbed in my prosthetic. My back prickled with awareness and I spun to face the monster, who was watching me. The old pipe lay discarded beside them.

I swallowed, wanting to reach up and tug my cap lower. I was panting, and my heart was still racing in my chest. “Thanks,” I managed.

The monster just nodded. Now that I could see more than an outline, the creature looked male. We assessed each other silently for a few moments. I could see his eyes tracing over the scar visible above my mask before dropping to take in the rest of me.

I did the same. The dude was… *massive*. He towered over me, which was an odd sensation. The fact that he had curving horns rising over his forehead only added to his height. His skin was a pale purple, and I could see the hint of a fang peeking from between his lips. His hair was long and kind of messy. Also purple. Dark purple, like his eyes, which were bigger than a human’s and had much larger irises, giving them a creepy look.

He had a cord of leather with a pendant around his neck, and wore nothing else except a black kilt that fell just below his knees, and heavy black boots. Every inch of him was muscle, I realised as unease settled in my gut. If he did try and attack me, I wouldn’t stand a chance. The thing that snagged and held my gaze, though, was the long tail that flicked lazily back and forth behind his legs. Its tip was a lethal, wicked sharp point. Like a dagger.

The monster's hands were clasped behind his back as he eyed me, making his shoulders and biceps look even more like boulders. It also told me how little of a threat he saw me as, because he was leaving his entire torso exposed. I stood my ground, gritting my teeth beneath my mask and forcing myself to hold his gaze. To not show an inch of unease or fear or weakness.

Eventually, the monster's lips quirked. "I found this." He held up my bag from behind his back. "Is it yours?"

Relief made my limbs weak. "Yes, it's mine."

I held out my hand for it, but the monster drew it back a little, out of reach. He cocked a brow at me. "So. What were you doing in that hole?"

I froze, hand still outstretched. "What was I *doing* in there?" I parroted in disbelief, impatience and anger chasing away any fear. "I fell! I didn't—I didn't *want* to be in the fucking hole!"

The monster shrugged, folding his huge arms over his chest, my bag dangling by its strap from one finger at his side. "How am I supposed to know everything that humans do or don't do? Maybe humans love being in holes."

Okay, I was done wasting time here. "They don't," I said shortly, striding forward and snatching my bag from him. "Thanks for your help." I knew I was being an asshole, but I seriously didn't have time for this. If he wasn't going to kill me, I was leaving.

"You mentioned a friend." Suddenly the monster was beside me, keeping up with long, easy strides. "Where are they?"

I gritted my teeth. "He's been taken. Which is why, as much as I appreciate your help, I can't stand around *chatting*. I need to find him."

Fuck, I hated the thought of him bound and taken by those things. Charlie was tough as shit, but anyone would be terrified in that situation.

"Taken? By who?"

I stopped where I'd last seen Charlie. The only signs of a struggle were scuff marks on the ground and a smear of dark, greyish-green blood. The dead creature was gone; it looked like they'd dragged it away with them. They'd taken Charlie's gun and bag, too.

"I don't know what they are," I answered, voice impatient and a little desperate. "They were about four foot. Greyish-green. Really long ears. Weird hands—just two big fingers with talons on them."

"Ah." The monster's voice sounded a little grim. "Kolebs."

I stopped. “Kolebs?” I echoed, unable to keep the panic out of my voice. “Is that what they were? Are they bad? Is that bad?”

I’d come across a lot of monsters during my time in the military, and could identify many species by sight—at least by the classifications given to them by the military. But those things that had dragged Charlie away, I’d never seen or heard of before.

“Well.” The monster sounded a little hesitant. “It’s not *good*.”

“What?” I felt a little faint.

“Don’t worry, though, they’re not going to eat him,” the monster continued in a brighter voice, as if that was the best news.

I stared at him, scratching lightly at the stinging graze on my stomach through my shirt. “I wasn’t… I hadn’t even been considering that. But thanks.”

“Oh. I just thought you might be worrying about it. You seem to be concerned about whether things are going to eat you.”

“I don’t—” I pinched the bridge of my nose, already feeling a headache forming. “Okay, thanks for the information,” I forced myself to say. “And the help. Did you see which way they took him?”

“Well, I did, but…” The big monster shrugged one bare, pale purple shoulder, making all the muscles in his arm and chest shift. “I don’t know how much good telling you will be.”

“And why is that,” I got out through gritted teeth.

“Because kolebs travel underground, mainly, in tunnel networks that they create.”

I stared at him, brow furrowed hard over my eyes. “So I find the entrance and follow them. Fine. Just tell me.”

The monster folded his huge arms over his chest and tapped long fingers against his bicep, assessing me silently for a moment. Just as I was about to blow my lid and start yelling, he seemed to come to some decision. “I will help you.”

I gaped at him. “You what?”

The monster nodded once, uncrossing his arms and sauntering closer. “I’ll help you get your friend back.”

My blood pressure was reaching dangerous levels. “I don’t believe I asked,” I gritted out. “I *asked* you to tell me which direction they took him. That was it. So *just. Tell. Me*.”

“We will find your friend quicker if I help you, human. Isn’t that what you want?” He shot me a wolfish grin, complete with fangs. “You are wasting time standing here arguing with me. Let’s go.”

“*I’m* wasting time?” I exploded. “Just *tell me* which direction they took him, you asshole!”

The monster just let out a booming laugh and clapped his hand on my shoulder, jerking it forward. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

He ambled off without another word. I stared after him, fists clenched tight by my sides and body shaking with anger. When he didn’t stop or even look back, though, I quickly realised that I had to follow him. He was the only one who could tell me which way those things had taken Charlie.

I was breathing hard through my nose, trying to calm down as I stomped after him. When I caught up, I was yanking my backpack angrily over my shoulders, wincing with the sharp pain that shot down my arms. At least I hadn’t dislocated anything grabbing onto that pipe as I fell, but it felt like maybe I’d torn a muscle.

I readjusted my cap on my head. “Why the hell are you *helping* me?” I emphasised the word sardonically, because the jury was definitely still out on whether he’d be a help or a goddamn nuisance.

The monster glanced over at me, brow quirked and big eyes hooded as he looked me up and down. He shrugged one shoulder. “I like the look of you, human.” He grinned at me again, fangs glinting.

“The fuck does *that* mean?” I snapped, beyond irritated that he wouldn’t just *tell me which way to go*. I needed to get Charlie. What if they were hurting him? Torturing him?

“It means just that.” The monster shrugged again and glanced over with a tiny, amused smirk that showed a peek of fang. “You are very angry. I’m sure you’re worried about your friend.” He reached out and patted my shoulder. “Don’t worry. We’ll find him.”

“Or just tell me which way to go and *I’ll* find him,” I gritted out through clenched teeth. “You can go back to whatever you were doing.”

He shrugged again. “I wasn’t doing anything in particular. Just walking. So I am happy to help.”

I exhaled a low, trembling breath. I wasn’t going to win this fight. I could just tell. “Fine,” I managed to get out. My jaw ticked. “Thanks for your *help*.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

I knew it was ridiculous, and vain, and the least important thing in the world to be thinking about right then… but the fact that this dude was so much taller than me was putting me in an even worse mood.

I wasn't used to meeting people taller than me. But he had to be nearing seven feet. And then there were the horns, curving up over his forehead, adding even more height. He was just… huge all over. I eyed his bare chest and stomach with envy as we walked. He had a goddamn eight-pack. How? Did he do a thousand crunches every night? Or was his kind just naturally muscular with insanely low body fat?

I was in damn good shape. I was proud of my body. But next to this guy, I mean… He was next level.

"So, what were you doing?" the monster asked me as we walked. I had to trust he knew where we were going, because I could spot absolutely no indication that those monsters had taken Charlie this way. "When your friend was taken?"

"We were heading to Tennessee." I readjusted the strap of my backpack, lamenting the loss of my rifle. I had to find another weapon fast. "Those things appeared and grabbed Charlie. As I was running to get him, I…" I felt my face go hot, "I didn't notice the sinkhole and fell in it."

The monster chuckled. "Quick reflexes, at least. You managed to grab that pipe."

"I guess. But I lost my gun." I shook my head, absently tracing the cut on my stomach through my shirt. "Need to find something else before we catch up to those kolebs."

The monster shrugged one shoulder carelessly. Judging by his size and the wicked sharp tip of his tail, which swished languidly behind him as we walked, he probably didn't have much need for weapons. "I'm sure we'll come across one."

I eyed him. Yeah, sure. Of course. *People left spare weapons laying around this monster-infested hellhole all the time*, I wanted to say. I bit my tongue, though. I was already starting to realise that this monster didn't take the bait. He didn't argue back, which just frustrated me more. Charlie and I were best friends, but we were both hot-headed. Whenever we'd gotten into

fights over the years, we'd yelled our heads off at each other, venting all the anger out, before forgetting it five minutes later.

This guy was *infuriatingly* placid.

"I'll be lucky to find another gun," I said instead, voice gruff with irritation.

The monster just shrugged again, spiking my blood pressure. "You find all kinds of things out here."

I gritted my teeth to hold back my sarcastic response.

"Have you not been in the Wastes long?" the monster asked me.

"I've been out here for twelve years."

The monster glanced at me with a nod. "Yes, I can see you haven't been sitting pretty in one of those human cities."

I made a face. I'd lived in one of the cities on the east coast for eight years until I could escape, signing up for the military on my eighteenth birthday. I knew for a fact that no one was *sitting pretty* in them. They were their own kind of hell.

The monster's words registered deeper, and I shot him an offended look but didn't say anything, a wave of self-consciousness washing over me. I resisted the urge to reach up and trace the scar on my face.

I didn't know if the big monster was particularly perceptive, or he'd just realised how his words had sounded, because he spoke again. "I only mean that you look like you can handle yourself out here. Don't worry, human." He shot me a wide, fanged grin. "I think you're pretty."

My face heated, but I rolled my eyes and let out a non-committal grunt in response, refusing to rise to his goading. It wasn't like he'd even properly seen my face, thanks to my mask.

The monster looked over at me again, and my shoulders stiffened when I felt his big eyes rake over me from head to toe. I tried to minimise my limp, jaw ticking as raw pain flared in my leg, getting worse with every step. "What is your name, human?"

I had a moment of indecision. It felt wrong to give a monster any kind of information about myself. But… fuck, he *was* 'helping' me find Charlie. And I guess we needed some way of alerting each other if anything happened.

"Hunter," I grunted, tugging the bill of my baseball cap lower over my forehead.

“Hunter,” the monster repeated, then chuckled. “It fits you. You seem more like a predator than other humans I’ve met. In a good way.”

I decided not to take offense at that. “What about you,” I asked gruffly, hating that I really wanted to know.

“My name is Edin,” he told me in an imperious tone, like I was supposed to be impressed.

I quirked a brow at him. “Okay then.”

We were still walking. How far was this entrance to the koleb tunnel network? And how did Edin even know where to find it?

“We’re definitely going the right way, yeah?” I asked, unable to keep the trepidation out of my voice.

Edin snorted with amusement. “Yes. Trust me, human.”

Fat fucking chance of that happening. If we got into those tunnels and it became obvious which way I had to go, I was going to ditch him the first chance I got.

Until then, though, I just had to hope that he wasn’t fucking me over. That he actually *was* taking me to where I could find Charlie. My gut clenched at the thought of those weird little creatures tying Charlie up and carrying him off. What did they want with him? What were they going to do? Edin had said they wouldn’t eat him, but how did he know that for sure?

“Those things,” I began, “that took Charlie. You said…” I swallowed, trying to ignore the wave of nausea that washed through my stomach. “You said they wouldn’t eat him. Is that… Are you sure?”

Edin nodded. “Kolebs do not eat meat.”

Relief made my legs weak for a moment, but it just raised more questions. “Why did they take him, then?”

Edin glanced over at me, unease in his big eyes. “Well, I don’t know *that* much about them, but I do know that they’re… somewhat primitive. Kolebs are known for the pilgrimage they take, to a place in our world, where the tribes try and outdo each other with the best… sacrifices.”

My breath caught, making me choke out a cough. “*Sacrifices?*”

Edin nodded, lips set in a grim line. “Yes. They gather and sacrifice creatures to their god in the hopes that it will bring them plentiful harvests and lots of young.” He looked at me again, eyes serious. “Do not worry. We will get him long before they reach the tear.”

“The tear?” I echoed, panic clawing at my throat.

“Between our worlds. If they’re taking him back for the pilgrimage, it will take them a while to get to it first.”

That made me feel a little better. We had time, and Charlie wasn’t in any immediate danger of being eaten. Still, the worry for him kept me silent and brooding as we walked, my body jittery with too much pent up energy, with the feeling that I wasn’t doing enough to get him back.

I had to distract myself or my head was going to explode. *I’ll get him back or I’ll die trying*, I told myself. I exhaled hard and reached up to readjust my cap, focusing on our surroundings to try and force myself out of my own head.

The monster was quiet beside me, and I wondered if he could tell I was having an internal freak out. I looked at him as we walked, taking in his tall horns. That deadly tail. A memory popped into my head, and before I’d even decided to speak, I blurted, “Kind of ironic that your name’s Edin.”

When he glanced back at me with a questioning look, one brow raised, I explained. “You look just like the devil in this weird old book my grandma had when I was a kid. She’d read it to me to try and get me to say my prayers before bed. They called him ‘Old Scratch’ in it. The devil, I mean.”

Edin grunted. “Why does that make me being called Edin ironic? That I look like this… devil?”

I realised he probably had no concept of our religions. “The Bible, this religious text, has the Garden of Eden in it, where the first humans lived. It was a paradise. The devil was the evil guy who got the humans to give in to temptation, so they got kicked out.”

Edin chuckled. “Sounds like me.” He shot me a wolfish grin.

I ignored the weird flurry of unease in my stomach and raised a brow at him, but said nothing. We carried on walking, and eventually Edin spoke again. “Did it work?”

“What?”

“Did it make you say prayers?”

I grunted, scratching at my abs. “No.” I glanced over at him, momentarily distracted by the flex of his muscular arms as he walked. How could anyone be that ripped? Would he share his workout secrets with me? “And then all the monsters came anyway, and praying felt even more useless. To me, anyway. Some people went the other way, saying this was a test. The rapture.”

Edin waved a careless hand. “Just curious creatures wanting to explore. No greater meaning behind it.”

I stared at him, almost tripping over my own feet. For the last decade, I’d had it drummed into me by the military that the monsters were attempting to wipe out humanity and take over. That only the military’s efforts in the Wastes kept them pushed back enough to protect the coastal cities.

Was Edin seriously saying that the monsters were actually just… excited tourists? “What do you—Seriously?”

Edin glanced over at me, his big eyes gleaming so eerily in the sun. “Yes. Why would I lie? The tear between our world and yours got bigger, and it let us all in.” He shrugged. “Obviously there are some that want to hurt and kill. Just as there are humans who want that too. For most of us, though, it’s just… somewhere new to wander. That’s all.”

I huffed out a humourless sound. “That’s all,” I echoed bitterly. “Monsters drove all of us out of our homes. Monsters forced us to live in poverty and filth in cramped cities that are too fucking small for the sheer number of people. Just so you all could *explore*?” I couldn’t keep the anger out of my tone.

Edin looked over at me with hard eyes. “*Monsters*, if you insist on being so general, did none of those things, human. Your military did.”

I flushed with anger. “The military—”

“—Was the one who started attacking *us*,” he interrupted. “All of us. Indiscriminately. There are some species of *monster* that came here who would never hurt a living soul. Yet that didn’t matter, because they looked different.”

I had no way of knowing if he was being honest, and that just got my back up even more. “There are plenty of monsters who want to kill humans. Who *eat* humans. I’ve met them.” I stopped dead, yanked down my mask and pointed at my scar. “I’ve gotten *very fucking close* to them.”

Edin came to a halt too. His big eyes tracked over my scar, seeing all of it for the first time. His gaze lingered on the way it pulled the left corner of my upper lip into a permanent little snarl, and I flushed deeper. I’d always been particularly self-conscious about that. I remembered his earlier remark about me seeming like more of a *predator* than other humans. Well, I certainly looked it.

I wasn't expecting him to say anything apologetic or soft. I wouldn't have *wanted* him to. I was still surprised by what he did say, though. "You are tough." His voice held a hint of admiration.

For some reason, it made me want to puff out my chest. I refrained. "Or dumb."

Edin chuckled. "Maybe."

We stared at each other in silence for a moment, before I shook my head and pulled my mask back up. "We need to keep moving." Charlie needed me. He would be depending on me to get him back. "Are we nearly at the tunnel entrance?"

"Yes."

Edin fell back into step beside me. My limp was getting worse, my stump aching. I tried to ignore it, as well as the stabbing pain radiating down my neck and through my tight shoulders from where I'd wrenched something when I grabbed onto the pipe while falling. "How do you even know where it is?" I asked.

The big monster chuckled. "I can smell them."

I wrinkled my nose, looking over at him. "Seriously?"

He nodded.

"What do they… smell like?"

Edin shrugged one big shoulder. "Dirt and roots and… a rotten sweet smell that is unique to them."

"Right."

"I have excellent senses," he told me with a hint of arrogance, as if he thought I didn't believe him. "Which is lucky for *you*, human, because it is why I could detect you were down in that hole. I nearly walked right past you."

I scowled with a huff. "I never said you didn't. Good for you. And yes, I'm very grateful for your supernatural senses." I couldn't quite keep the sardonic bite out of my tone.

"Well you *should* be," he griped again. "Because it's not like I come across many humans who run headfirst into holes—"

"I get it," I bit out, face flushing behind my mask. "I was kind of distracted by my friend being *kidnapped by monsters*."

He made a little grunting sound. "Still."

My blood pressure was spiking again. This monster was going to age me by twenty years, I swore to god. If I had a heart attack before saving

Charlie, I’d use my last dying breath to somehow take this annoying, overbearing purple dude down with me.

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CHAPTER FIVE

“Here.” Edin came to a stop.

I stared at him for a moment, before looking around us. All around us.

At nothing.

There was a long moment of silence, broken only by a faint breeze rustling the grass. Then I said, the vein in my forehead pulsing, “There’s nothing fucking here.”

We were standing at the side of the highway, nothing but fields stretching either side of us. It was quiet, and would have been peaceful if I wasn’t vibrating with fury at the fact that this monster had made me walk to an *empty fucking field.*

Edin just chuckled, making me clench my hands into white-knuckled fists. I wondered what he’d do if I punched him in the goddamn jaw. “There is,” he said. “You just can’t see it.”

I was seething. “Show me, then,” I said from between clenched teeth, my voice low and close to trembling with anger. If this fucker had led me the wrong way and lost me my chance of finding Charlie, I was going to—

“Here.” He squatted down and reached for the grass that bumped up against the side of the highway. Somehow, he curled his fingers underneath it—almost like it was a rug. Then he peeled it back.

I could feel my eyes bugging out as I stared at the three-foot-wide hole he’d exposed, tucked against the side of the asphalt. “How in the hell did you know that was there?”

“I told you, I can smell them.” Edin stood back up and dusted off his hands. “It stinks here. Besides, there are obvious signs.” He waved an imperious hand around at the field and road.

I looked again. There were no obvious signs.

Whatever. “Let’s go.” I squatted down to peer into the hole. It declined at a gentle angle, like a ramp. I really hoped the whole tunnel wasn’t only four feet tall, although crawling would give my stump a break, at least.

I jumped when a big, hot hand gripped my shoulder. My jaw clenched, entire body painfully aware that the monster was touching me for the first time. My nape prickled with awareness, fingers twitching. Half of it was

instinct I'd trained into myself when it came to monsters. The other half was… just weird.

"I'll go first," Edin told me.

I gritted my teeth, mind conjuring up several potential reasons why he might think he had to go first. Did he think I couldn't handle it? That humans were too delicate? It made me want to argue back, just for the sake of it, but that wouldn't help Charlie.

"Fine." I stood up and took a step back.

Edin looked surprised at my acquiescence for a brief moment. Then he was dropping into the hole, crouching down and ducking his head to get inside. His horns still scraped the top, dirt coming loose and showering down.

A few moments later, I heard a gentle thud. "Alright." Edin's impossibly deep voice rumbled up from the hole. "Come down."

I squatted back down and gripped the edge of the hole to jump down. "Tell me it isn't this small the whole way." Now I was in it, I felt mildly claustrophobic. The smell of damp earth filled my nose. Not necessarily unpleasant, but cloying and too warm.

Edin chuckled. "Thankfully, no. It's tall enough for me, so you'll be fine."

Right, because he was such a giant. I shimmied down the slope, feeling my backpack drag on the ground underneath me. When my feet suddenly dropped, nothing beneath them, Edin spoke. "It's alright. A small drop. You'll land on your feet."

I had to trust him. I carefully slid a bit further down until I had no choice but to drop. He hadn't been lying. I was only in the air for a split-second before my boots thudded on soft but compact dirt. I winced at the pain that shot up my left thigh from the jarring of the prosthetic against my stump. My leg buckled for a second, but I managed to stiffen it back up.

It was dark down here. Obviously. But I hadn't even considered that before, too worked up and impatient to go after Charlie. I didn't even have a weapon.

I wondered if Edin had night vision. "I can't see anything," I said, anxiously rubbing my fingertip over the thin cut on my abs.

"Ah. Yes." I heard heavy boots sinking into the soft ground. A moment later, soft pink light flared to my left. I blinked and let my eyes adjust. When they did, I could see Edin standing beside what looked like…

mushrooms. Clusters of little glowing mushrooms, dotting the walls of the tunnel.

"What the hell?" I murmured, moving closer to them.

Edin nodded at them. "The bulk of kolebs' diet. But they also use them for light in their tunnels."

"So they're… not from here?" I asked, peering closer. The light they emitted was pulsing faintly, and up close I could see what looked like tiny capillaries all over the smooth surfaces of the mushroom caps. Their stalks curved out from the dirt, also glowing but a slightly deeper colour; less bright. I wanted to touch one but didn't dare.

"No, not from here. The kolebs must have brought spores over to start growing them here."

"So how did you…" I wiggled my fingers at them. "Get them to light up?"

Edin chuckled. "Movement close by triggers the luminescence. They'll light the tunnel as we go."

"Huh." I leaned back. "That's wild." Then I looked over at Edin and took a deep breath. "So… thanks for showing me the tunnel entrance. I can probably take it from here."

Edin just raised a dark brow at me. "Can you?"

I fisted my hands and lifted my chin. "Yes."

The monster made a big show of crossing his arms and looking me over. "With no weapon?"

I was glad my flushed cheeks were hidden behind my mask. I tugged the bill of my cap lower. "Yes. I'll be fine." My voice was overly defensive.

Edin made that little grunting sound that I already found infuriating. "Mm." He cocked a dark brow at me, then slowly dragged those big eerie eyes, gleaming in the mushrooms' pink glow, to the tunnel. "So… which way did they take your friend, then?"

I froze, then looked around us for the first time. I could still barely see—the mushrooms didn't give off *that* much light—but I *could* see that the tunnel extended in two directions.

I clenched my teeth. "Well," I began, speaking between them, "why don't you just point me in the right direction, and then you can go back to your life."

Edin rolled his eyes, which made me vibrate with anger. "You won't last long without me down here, human. You are wasting time again arguing.

Let’s go.”

I went stiff all over. “I’ve managed twelve years fighting monsters out here just fine, asshole, so—”

“Gah, you are so angry all the time!” Edin waved a hand at me and loped past, heading towards the tunnel to my right. The light from the mushrooms he’d been standing beside dimmed, but a second later another set glimmered to life. “Every minute you waste bickering with me is another minute further away from your friend. They are travelling much faster than us.”

This dude was definitely going to give me a heart attack soon. Face red, fists clenched, I stomped after him before he could vanish into the gloom of the tunnel. “For the record, I think you’re a goddamn asshole,” I told him. The headache already pressing behind my eyeballs sharpened.

Edin just laughed, which only made me angrier. “For helping you?”

Some deep, rational part of my brain told me I was being a dick. He wasn’t actually being an asshole. Not at all. He *was* helping me. But for some reason, I was overreacting to everything this big purple monster did or said, and I had no idea why. Something about him just… gnawed at me. Twisted something in my gut.

The anger and the stress and the guilt from letting Charlie get carried away by those things was overriding everything else, and I couldn’t talk myself down off the furious ledge I was perched on.

“Jury’s out on whether you’re helping,” I snapped, but a tendril of guilt made my chest tighten momentarily.

Edin just chuckled, looking back at me over his shoulder. His eye glimmered in the pink glow, and the weird ambient light danced over the waves of his long, dark purple hair, making it look multichromatic, like an oil slick. “It can’t be good for your health to be so angry all the time, human.”

I took a deep, shuddering breath through my nose. In, then out. Slowly. Then again. My neck and shoulders were so tight it felt like something might pop. My leg was throbbing. I could tell that soon, I wouldn’t be able to put much weight on it.

I gritted my teeth and ignored it all. “Let’s just keep moving, yeah?” I stretched my neck from side to side, trying to ease the throbbing tension causing my shoulders to stay hunched up. “And keep quiet so we don’t miss anything.”

I could practically hear Edin rolling his eyes as he ambled down the tunnel in front of me, his horns brushing the ceiling every now and then. “Fine.”

I eyed his tail, which was flicking irritably, its dagger-like tip swiping dangerously close to me. I couldn’t tell if he was doing it on purpose or not, and I narrowed my eyes at his broad, bare back with suspicion. “Watch the tail.”

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CHAPTER SIX

It felt like we walked for hours through the dark tunnels that stank of earth, mushrooms flaring pink to light our way and dying back out as we passed. But it could have been no time at all—everything was moving slowly for me now, because I was in agony.

My arms and shoulders were screaming from the jarring pain of grabbing that pipe while falling. My head was pounding. I could barely put weight on my left leg. I knew there'd be a severe blister on my stump, and I was not looking forward to dealing with it when we eventually had to stop. But I wasn't willing to stop. We'd seen no sign of the kolebs that had taken Charlie. We hadn't even *heard* anything in these weirdly quiet tunnels. It was like the earth was muffling everything, until I could feel the pressure of the silence against my eardrums.

"How can they be this far ahead of us?" I eventually said, unable to keep the thread of desperation out of my voice. My body was failing me, but I couldn't stop. I couldn't *rest* while Charlie was stuck with those creatures. What were they doing to him?

"They move fast, and they know these tunnels better than me," Edin said, his deep voice so rumbly that I could have sworn a little flurry of dirt fell to the ground from his timbre. "We have to move slower so I can keep their scent in my nose."

"So how are we *ever* going to catch up with them?" I asked worriedly. The anger had left me. I was too exhausted and in too much pain to maintain that level of rage for this long. It felt like every part of my body was knotted with tension.

"We will," Edin grunted. Then he looked back at me, and I saw his big eyes soften a little as he took in my no doubt sorry state, limping behind him. "Don't worry, human. We'll get your friend back." He cocked his head and stopped a moment later, turning to face me. "What's wrong?"

"Huh?" I realised I was shaking when I came to a halt too. My mouth was dry, and alongside the throbbing in my skull was a sharp pain that darted behind my eyeballs every time I moved them. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a drink, so I shrugged off my backpack and unzipped it with trembling fingers.

Edin took a step closer. “You look… Are you injured?” He looked me over, lingering on my left leg. I couldn’t keep any weight on it as I stood, gulping down warm water from my canteen. “Is your leg hurt?”

I pulled the bottle away with a gasp. “There’s no wound, if that’s what you mean.”

Edin cocked his head. “But it… hurts?”

My jaw clenched as I stuffed my bottle back in my bag. “It’s just my prosthetic. It’s rubbing.” I wiped a hand down my face. “I shouldn’t really be walking on it this much.”

“Your what? What is a… proh-thetic?”

“Prosthetic.” I relented and limped to the side of the tunnel so I could lean against the dirt wall. I was damp with sweat all over from the effort of walking for hours and hours on my leg. I reached down with a groan and tugged up my left pant leg, so Edin could see where the fake metal leg slotted up against the stump below my left knee. “Monster got to me a few years ago. Had to have it amputated.”

Edin stared at my leg. “Humans can’t regrow missing limbs,” he stated.

I quirked a brow at him. It sent pain stabbing through my temple. “I’m aware.”

He finally dragged his eyes back up to my face, and I let my pant leg fall over the prosthetic, straightening up. He stared at me in silence for a moment. “I had a leg ripped off by a karik when I was young,” he told me.

I looked at him, then dropped my gaze to his legs. His two lavender-coloured, flesh-and-blood legs, visible beneath his kilt. “Real funny.” My voice was flat.

“No, I did. But I can… My limbs regenerate.”

I felt my eyebrows hike up as I swung my gaze back to his craggy face. “Well. Aren’t you lucky.” I didn’t necessarily think he was lying. I knew some monsters possessed regenerative abilities like that. Hell, some creatures native to this world did too, so it wasn’t like it was totally outlandish.

Edin’s gaze hardened. His brows furrowed into a frown as he stared at me. “Are you this unpleasant all the time, human?” he asked me. I felt my face go bright red behind my mask. “Or have I done something I’m unaware of that is particularly offensive to you?”

Shame made me deflate. The pain and exhaustion had already drained the anger out of me, and now I couldn’t even remember why I was being so

prickly with Edin. “No, I…” I exhaled and rubbed my feverishly hot forehead under my cap. “I’m sorry, okay? I know I’ve been a complete asshole. I’m just…” I shook my head and pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to massage away some of the pain throbbing through my skull. “I’m really fucking worried about Charlie.”

Edin stilled, like he hadn’t been expecting me to apologise. “It’s fine, human.” His voice was gruff, but it had softened a little. He cocked his head at me. “Your friend. This Charlie. He is… very important to you?”

I nodded. “He’s my best friend. I just…” I shook my head. “Feels like I failed him,” I muttered.

“You didn’t fail anyone. Kolebs are stealthy. They’re small, but in packs, they’re a force to be reckoned with. Anything can be defeated by a swarm big enough.” Edin hesitated for a second before stepping forward and resting a hand on my shoulder. I could feel the heat of it through my shirt. “We’ll get him back.”

I exhaled a hard breath, something lodging in my throat. I didn’t know why this monster was helping me. Why he was being kind. But I’d take it. Despite my long career in the military fighting them, I wasn’t particularly prejudiced about monsters like some other soldiers.

I was glad one of the nice ones had found me in that damn sinkhole. “Thank you,” I scraped out, throat raw. “For your help. I mean it.” I scratched at the graze on my stomach, and saw Edin’s head cock as he followed my action.

“You have done that a lot,” he remarked, nodding at my hand. “Why are you scratching?”

I grunted. “Monster managed to catch me with its claw earlier today.” I pulled up my shirt to peer down at the thin cut on my stomach. I squinted, barely able to see it in the mushrooms’ dim light. “Barely got me, but it’s just itchy. I put antiseptic on it already.”

Edin dropped onto one knee so he could peer at it. “What was it?”

“The monster?” At his nod, I thought back. I was used to summing up monster descriptions for military reports, so the details came easily. “Black and shiny. Taller than you. Looked like an invertebrate, with a long, almost conical body. Four legs. Really long rectangular eyes.”

“Ah.” Edin’s voice was a little grim. “No wonder you’re in pain.” He chuckled. “And being so irritable.”

My breath caught. “What?”

“That was a forileun.” He rose back up to his full height. “They secrete a poison that amplifies the pain signals sent to the brain.”

I groaned and rubbed my hot forehead under my hat. “Of course they fucking do.”

“It’s not fatal, though.” Edin sounded sympathetic. He patted my shoulder. “But you’ve got another few hours of this ahead of you, I’m afraid.” He nodded down at my stomach. “If it had cut you any deeper, you would be in too much agony to move.”

I exhaled. “So that’s why they have it?” I asked. “To incapacitate prey?”

Edin nodded. He dropped his hand from my shoulder and took a step back. “I think we should go to the surface and find somewhere to rest for the night.”

“No,” I said immediately. “We have to keep going. We can’t let them get too far ahead.”

“They will rest too,” Edin told me. “And… I think you need to stop for a while.”

Heat flushed up my throat. “I can handle the pain. I’ve managed so far —”

“Or I can carry you, and we can keep going,” Edin interrupted, folding his huge arms over his chest and peering down at me with an imperious brow raised.

I got the feeling he said it because he knew the exact reaction it would invoke. “There is no fucking way in hell I’m letting you carry me,” I grated out, wincing at the intense ache in my shoulders as I eased my backpack back on.

Edin chuckled. “So we find somewhere to rest. Don’t worry. They are not too far ahead. We’re still on their tail.”

My throat ached with the desire to agree. The thought of stopping, of resting my leg, was painfully tempting. But it felt like giving up. It felt like I was abandoning Charlie. “I can’t—”

“You will be no good to Charlie if you can’t walk at all,” Edin said. “And even without the forileun wound, if you keep moving on that leg tonight, you won’t be able to walk in the morning. Yes?”

I exhaled. Exhaustion made my shoulders slump; my body drooped. At length, I nodded. “Yeah. Okay. Let’s find somewhere.” I looked around us. Nothing except for a couple of small clusters of glowing pink mushrooms and dirt. So much dirt.

“We passed a surface entrance a minute ago,” Edin said.

“We did?” I hadn’t seen anything, but then I couldn’t see much down here. Plus I was distracted by pain, which only reinforced the fact that it was the right decision to rest.

Edin nodded. “It’s also night time on the surface now, and that means we won’t be the only ones using these tunnels to travel. Nocturnal creatures are waking up. It would be wise to go to the surface before we come across… anything.”

I swallowed. “Right. Sure. Okay.” I forced my shoulder away from the dirt wall and turned to start walking back. My left leg buckled the moment I tried putting even a scant amount of weight on it.

Edin was there in an instant, a thick purple arm swooping around my back to keep me upright. My face went hot. At least I hadn’t fallen flat on my face in front of him. “Goddamnit,” I gritted out.

“Will you at least let me support you while we walk?” Edin asked, a faint hint of amusement in his rumbling voice. He was stooping a little. His fingers were hot where they gripped my right lat muscle tight, keeping me upright.

I managed to limp forward one step with his help, but I was sweating. “Yeah,” I croaked, voice tight with pain. “Fuck.” I hoped Edin wasn’t right about how I’d feel in the morning. Because right now, it definitely felt like I wouldn’t be able to walk at all.

I could feel Edin’s muscles flexing against my side as we walked, and it was weirdly distracting. His skin was so hot, and this close his scent filled my nose. Like leather and freshly cut wood. It was a welcome respite from the cloying smell of dirt, and I inhaled it gratefully.

We were moving far slower now, and a few minutes later Edin came to a stop. “I’ll hoist you up.” He nodded to my left, and when I turned to look I saw a slope a few feet up.

I shook my head. “My arms work fine. I can get up.” I tried to keep my voice neutral and not defensive, which was my default setting with this guy, apparently. To soften my words, I slapped a hand to his arm once before hopping closer to the edge of the slope. My whole body ached, but it was still easy, despite the pain radiating through my shoulders, for me to pull myself up until I could get my right knee on the slope. When my left followed, it sent a jarring shock of pain to my stump, but it was a million times better than walking on it.

I crawled up, and in less than a minute I was sucking in cool fresh air. It was dark, but there was enough light for me to see that we were emerging at the edge of a tiny town. There was a single strip of buildings, and they were all dark. Still, I stayed as quiet as possible as I hoisted myself up and, with effort, rose to my feet, hopping a little before I managed to get my balance.

Edin emerged from the tunnel a moment later, rising gracefully to his full height and looking around. I had no concept of where we were. We'd been in the western-most tip of Kentucky when Charlie was taken, and I didn't know which direction Edin and I had been walking. Technically we could have walked far enough to reach Tennessee.

Indecision suddenly warred inside me. Would it be better for me to continue on to the Tennessee base and get the military looking for Charlie? Or would that just waste precious time? How much effort would they really put into finding a singular soldier out of thousands?

I glanced at Edin. What would the military do if they found him with me? Would they kill him on sight? Capture him and take him to wherever they were holding monsters now? I swallowed, feeling unease gnaw at the pit of my stomach. What Edin had said earlier niggled in my brain. That the military killed all monsters, regardless of whether they were dangerous or violent. So far, Edin had been neither.

I'd only interacted with monsters when they attacked us. I hadn't been stationed at the bases that dealt specifically with the military's specimen programme, like the Nebraska base. But I *had* monitored monster nests. I'd sent the intel to my superiors and thought nothing of it. What if I'd contributed to the deaths of monsters that were just trying to live peacefully?

Guilt clawed at me, but I forced it back. Forced myself to focus on the immediate issue, which was Charlie's safety. I decided then and there that I didn't want to risk wasting time going to the Tennessee base first. I didn't want to risk them deciding that it wasn't worth the manpower. That *Charlie* wasn't worth the manpower. I may have dedicated the last twelve years of my life to the military, but that didn't mean I was under any illusions about their shortcomings.

I'd get Charlie back my-fucking-self. Well… *we'd* get him back.

"I guess this place is as good as any," I said to Edin, jerking my chin towards the still and silent row of buildings. He nodded, then stepped closer and hooked his arm around my back without saying anything. Gratitude

swelled in my chest, the exhaustion and constant pain making me far more sentimental than usual. Not enough to express it, though.

Together we headed towards the main street running down between the buildings. I suppressed a shiver as the sweat on my body cooled in the night air. I gripped Edin's back for balance, his skin almost feverishly hot under my hand. *That's obviously why he doesn't wear a shirt,* I thought absently. He must run hotter than most others.

In fact, my left side was starting to sweat where it was pressed against him, my shoulder tucked under his armpit. I felt grimy, dirty and sweaty. I hoped this town still had a water supply. The military kept the water and power going in the Wastes, but that didn't stop power lines getting downed or plumbing getting blocked.

"Any preference?" Edin asked me, his deep voice rumbling in the quiet stillness, as we started walking down the centre of the road. There was a small store to our left, and what looked like an old florist shop next to it, but further down there seemed to be some residential buildings.

I nodded towards them. "Let's try up there."

The prospect of resting very soon made the pain in my stump sharpen to an overwhelming ache, like my body didn't want to risk me backing out of getting some relief by reminding me of just how much pain it was in. I gritted my teeth, limping as fast as I could, grateful that Edin hadn't commented on our pace. He just patiently walked beside me, even though our steps were comically small for a creature with legs as long as his.

There was a block of apartments just up ahead. We limped towards it, until a tiny sound from behind us made Edin's entire form stiffen. Before he could turn around, a harsh voice rang out, making us both freeze.

"Stop or you're dead."

Fuck. I gripped Edin's back, fingers digging in to convey… I didn't even know what. But I didn't have a weapon, and I could barely walk. This wasn't good.

"Drop your weapons," the voice rang out again, clear and steady in the quiet night. It was female-sounding, but harsh and grating, like the owner had smoked twenty a day for their entire life.

Edin's fingers gave my lat an imperceptible squeeze. "We have no weapons." His voice rumbled out, vibrating through my side. From the corner of my eye, I noticed that his tail was curled around to the front of his left thigh so that the tip wasn't visible to the person behind us.

“Turn around.”

I’d already catalogued what was within reach that could be a potential weapon. There was a rusted length of pipe a few yards to my right. It looked like it had corroded away from where it had been connected to the side of the nearest building. There was also a plank of jagged wood sticking up from the first step of the porch. I wondered if my leg would let me run to grab either.

We turned as one, slowly, Edin’s arm around me a weirdly solid comfort. I wasn’t overly worried about him. His entire body was basically a weapon, *and* he could regenerate limbs. But I wouldn’t hold it against him if he took off; if he didn’t want to take the risk of getting injured. It wasn’t like we really knew each other. It wasn’t like he *had* to help me.

If he *did* take off though, my odds were razor thin.

Fuck. I’m sorry, Charlie, I thought. If I died here, no one would ever go and save him. No one else knew he was even missing. Sure, maybe the military would eventually look for us, but I got the feeling we were the least of their worries right now. If we were important, they would have sent our pick-up out to us in Minnesota.

The owner of the voice was a human, and looked female. I assessed her as fast as I could, first taking in the shotgun in her hands, currently pointing at us. She looked to be around her forties, thin and wiry, wearing an old flannel shirt with a rip in the left sleeve, dirty jeans and hiking boots. Dark hair was pulled back away from her face, which was severe as she eyed us with hostility.

She didn’t look friendly.

“This is our territory,” she rasped, never once lowering the gun. “And we don’t let strangers just wander through our territory. Especially not a fuckin’ beastie.”

So she was a raider, then. Shit, we’d come up somewhere near a raider camp. I wondered for a second if it was the particularly nasty one Charlie had talked about, and felt a flash of apprehension when I remembered what they’d done to the soldiers they’d found. At least I wasn’t wearing anything that identified me as military.

But I *was* with a monster—or ‘beastie’, as raiders tended to call them—which would make this raider equally as hostile.

“Don’t worry. We’re not staying,” I said shortly, even though that was exactly what we’d been planning on doing. Guess we’d be finding

somewhere else to sleep.

She sneered at me. “Too fucking right you’re not staying. But first I think I’ll liberate that pack from you. Throw it over.”

I stiffened. I wasn’t just going to hand her my backpack, even if she did have a gun pointed at me. Maybe I was stupid, but I wouldn’t last long without my supplies anyway. Out in the Wastes, possessions sometimes *were* worth dying over.

“I’m not giving you my fucking bag, lady.”

Her head jerked back, like she was shocked I’d dare talk back when I had a shotgun pointed at me. “You either hand it over or I blow your head off, shithead.”

“You’re not going to shoot us.” Edin’s voice was calm, and I took note of the flash of fear that sparked in the raider’s eyes as she turned them to the towering purple monster.

“Yes, I fucking am.” Her voice was the tiniest bit less steady than before. “If you don’t hand the bag over.”

“Do you really believe shooting me will stop me?” Edin asked. I suppressed the urge to look at him, but I was desperate to know if he was bluffing or not. “Even if you shoot me, I will still be able to break your neck. Is the bag really worth it?”

The gun trembled almost imperceptibly before she gritted her teeth and readjusted her grip. “I’ve got good aim, fucker. Nothing can survive a shot to the head.”

Edin rumbled what I could have sworn was actually a little chuckle. “You’d be surprised.”

The raider looked unsure. The fear in her eyes flared brighter, but then she swung her gaze back to me. “*He’s* the one with the bag. It’s not even like it’s *your* stuff.”

Edin made a little sound of displeasure. “I’m not letting you hurt him or take his bag, human.”

The raider gritted her teeth and swallowed. “You take one step towards me and I’ll shoot your human boyfriend in the gut. So just give me the fucking bag, and I’ll let you go.”

“No.”

The raider bristled. She let out a short, sharp whistle, and suddenly six more people appeared, melting out of the darkness of the alley behind her.

“Just give us the bag,” one of the newcomers gritted out, the voice male and raspy, “and you can go.”

“I said no.” Edin’s insolent, arrogant tone almost made me want to smile, if we hadn’t had two guns and a collection of other weapons pointed at us.

One guy had a baseball bat with barbed wire wrapped around it. Two were holding crowbars, and another a short dagger. One of them was holding a goddamn golf club, but I supposed raiders had to use whatever they could. The other gun was an ancient-looking revolver, and it shook wildly in the hand of the raider holding it, who was gaping at Edin. He looked less rough and hardened than the others. Must have been fairly new to the Wastes.

“Then I’ll fuckin’ shoot you,” the female raider was spitting, but she’d done nothing but threaten it enough times by now for me to know that she really, *really* didn’t want to risk Edin snapping her neck.

Beside me, I heard Edin let out an almost inaudible sigh. Then his fingers squeezed my side again, before I felt his index tap twice, slightly lower down. Somehow, I knew exactly what he was asking me. I tentatively rested more weight on my left leg, until I was confident I’d be able to stay upright when Edin let go of me. I tapped his side twice.

Moving too fast for me to register, Edin was gone from my side. Before he even reached the raider, the shotgun was whipped out of her hands and skidding through the dust to land far away from the group of raiders, and I realised he’d used his tail to grab it. Huh. So the thing was prehensile. That was… weird.

The raider gaped, hands up as if she was still holding the gun, and then she let out a little choked gasp of terror as Edin batted her away with one big hand.

I stopped watching after that, instead gritting my teeth and lunging into action. I managed to grab the rusted pipe, and adrenaline momentarily faded the pain in my leg as I ran towards the nearest raider.

They should’ve given the revolver to someone else, because the guy holding it was fucking useless. He was almost tripping over his own feet as he backed away, hands trembling. Then he dropped the gun and turned to run, vanishing into the darkness of the alley.

“Fucking traitor!” one of the others snarled after him, but then he seemed to notice the dropped gun and lunged for it.

I was already moving, though, and I dove and grabbed it before he could, dropping the pipe. I cocked the gun as I swung it round to the raider's chest and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

I did it again, and again, but every chamber was empty. There hadn't even been any fucking bullets in the thing. I kept hold of it to pistol-whip the raider as he bore down on me, and he grunted with pain but still grasped at my arms. Pulling back my good leg, I drove it into his gut and he fell off me with a groan of agony, giving me time to scramble to my feet. My left leg buckled under me and I stumbled. In that time, the raider recovered enough to wrench the dagger from his waistband free and swipe at me.

The blade just nicked my arm, barely enough for me to register. I pistol-whipped him again, and this time he dropped back like dead weight, unconscious. Before I could even catch my breath, someone yanked hard at my backpack, causing me to stumble back as pain streaked through my shoulders. My breath caught when my left boot thumped hard onto the ground, sending agony flaring up my thigh.

A raider was trying to rip the bag from my shoulders. Fuck, they must have been really desperate for supplies. He didn't have a weapon anymore, I didn't know what had happened to it, but I tried to shove him back, my shoulders jerking as he kept his clawed fingers dug into my bag.

I gripped his wrists and twisted. He let go with a cry of pain just before the delicate bones snapped under my fingers, and I used the time to quickly swipe the unconscious raider's dagger, abandoned on the ground beside his limp hand.

"Touch me again and I'll cut your fucking hands off," I snarled at the raider who was clasping his wrists. He bared his teeth at me, but swallowed nervously when he saw the dagger in my hand.

I could see him trying to weigh up the odds; to calculate whether the risk was worth it. But then movement to my right swung both our gazes that way. The other raiders were sprawled out on the ground, either unconscious or dead. I couldn't tell which. Edin was stomping towards us, big dark eyes flashing with anger as they fixed on the guy in front of me.

The raider actually whimpered as he took a step back. Then he spun and started running, but Edin caught up. That long, deadly tail wrapped around the guy's middle and lifted him clean into the air, before throwing him. He

landed with a sickening thud a few yards away, but groaned in agony. Not dead then.

“Let’s go.” Edin reached me and wrapped that huge arm around my back, supporting me once again as if the events of the last five minutes hadn’t even happened.

I was still clutching the dagger, so I tucked it into the waistband of my pants and grabbed a hold of Edin for balance. “You okay?” I asked, a little out of breath as the adrenaline wore off and agony seared through every inch of my body again. “Did they hurt you?”

Edin snorted. “Of course not.” Then he raised his free arm, showing off the shotgun he was holding. “Replacement gun.” He rested it over his left shoulder and shot me a cocky grin as we started slowly making our way down the street. “Told you we’d find one.”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

When I stepped out of the motel room the next morning, the day was clear and cool. I could hear the faint, satisfying rustle of trees in the nearby forest, and the sky was already a pale blue. Normally I was up at dawn, but I'd slept longer thanks to sheer exhaustion and the insane events of the day before.

Edin and I had had to walk out of that tiny town and along the highway until we came across a motel another hour later, by which point I was almost delirious with exhaustion and agony. Edin had all but carried me the last few miles, then deposited me in a musty room and told me he'd be in the one next door if I needed him.

I'd passed out almost instantly, and woken a couple of hours later with my heart racing and hands itching for my gun. After calming down a little, I'd gone into the bathroom and taken a shivering cold shower before dealing with my stump. I'd had to lance a blister that had formed, which was as unpleasant as it sounded, before going back to sleep.

I'd made sure to pad the stump this morning with extra bandages lining the inside of the sleeve that fitted over it. It already felt much better, especially with a layer of soothing antiseptic cream coating it as well as the pills I'd popped. I was limping, but not as badly as the day before. My shoulders and arms didn't hurt as much, and my headache was nearly gone. The cut on my stomach had scabbed over and stopped itching, which was a relief.

Edin was already outside when I left my motel room. He was lounging back on the hood of an old car, hands behind his head and face tilted to the sun. I stared for a moment, my gaze automatically dropping to take in his huge biceps and bare chest. *To assess him as a potential threat,* I told myself, ignoring the pulse low in my belly.

I tugged my cap lower over my forehead and readjusted the mask covering the lower half of my face. "Morning." My voice was gruff as I approached the big purple monster.

Edin's head lazily tilted to the side as he cracked open one dark eye. A wolfish grin spread over his face. "Good morning." With an impressive

display of strength that I refused to gawk at, he sat up, his abs rippling, and slid off the hood of the car to land with a thud. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.” I cleared my throat and readjusted the strap of my backpack on my shoulder. “Leg feels much better.” I felt my face get hot behind my mask, and I cleared my throat again awkwardly. “Thanks for uh… Sorry for being such dead weight by the end yesterday.”

Edin made a dismissive sound. “Gah. It was nothing.” He cocked a brow at me, that arrogant smirk returning. “Considering how much pain you were in, you did well with those raiders.”

I grunted. “They were useless. It wasn’t all that much of a fight, even with the leg.”

Edin rumbled out a laugh. “Still. They had guns and other weapons. We only had my tail.”

“Yeah.” Reaching up and scratching the back of my neck, I shifted my weight and gestured towards the road. “So uh, shall we get going?”

Edin nodded once and fell into step beside me. “How did you sleep?”

“Good, all things considered. Had to deal with my leg, which wasn’t pretty.” Edin grunted sympathetically, which almost made me want to smile. I glanced over at him. His skin was such a weird colour. It almost gleamed in the sunlight. “How about you?”

Edin shrugged one big, muscled shoulder, distracting me for a moment. “I don’t actually need to sleep, but I like it. Makes me feel energised.” He grinned at me before stretching his arms up over his head, every single muscle in his arms and torso rippling and flexing.

I whipped my head forward again, cheeks flushing under my mask as something weird swooped low in my belly. I swallowed. Cleared my throat. Gripped the strap of my backpack tighter. “Oh, okay.” My voice was raspy.

I snuck a glance at him and felt another flush of heat rise through me. But it was followed immediately by a wave of guilt. What was wrong with me? I had to focus on Charlie. On nothing but getting him back.

Fuck. Charlie. I wondered if he was okay. If those things had given him any food or water, or if he’d been able to sleep at all. I had a sudden flash of intense panic. “How are we going to get back to the tunnels?” I asked, voice rough with worry. “We can’t go back through the raider—”

“I can get us to another entrance,” Edin interrupted. “There’s one not far. Don’t worry.”

I exhaled, but the tension kept my shoulders tight as my mind remained fixed on Charlie. I jumped when a big hand landed on my shoulder. “We will get him, Hunter.”

I nodded once. “Yeah.” We would. Because other than me dying in the process, it was the only possible outcome. I wasn’t accepting anything else.

A wave of gratitude flooded through me, and I looked over at Edin. “Thanks. For your help. And…” I flushed. “Sorry for being such an asshole yesterday.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “You were stressed and injured.” He paused. “Plus, you did nearly die falling down a big hole.”

“Still, I…” I shook my head. “I know I’m not the uh… easiest person to get along with,” I said sheepishly. “Charlie’s normally the only guy who can put up with me.”

Edin burst out laughing, the impossibly deep, rumbling sound sending warmth through me. “So that’s why you’re trying so hard to get him back.”

I almost wanted to smile.

We didn’t walk for long until Edin stopped and revealed another tunnel entrance, nestled at the base of a tree. The sweet, warm scent of earth was familiar now as I dropped into the tunnel, a cluster of nearby mushrooms slowly flickering to life and casting pink haze over Edin’s bare skin as he thudded to the dirt ground beside me.

I swallowed and looked away from the way the light danced briefly across the impossibly hard muscles of his abdomen. Instead, I peered up at the roots of the tree dangling above us. “Which way?” I asked.

Edin nodded his head to our left, and we set off with him in front again. The soft earth ground was easier on my leg, and I was feeling better overall today. More optimistic. I hadn’t known him long at all, but we’d already been through a hell of a lot together, and I was slowly starting to… trust Edin. He had nothing to gain from helping me. And he clearly *could* sense the kolebs, seeing as he kept finding the entrances to their tunnel network. I was getting more confident that together, we’d be able to rescue Charlie.

The fact that I had a weapon today—two, actually, the dagger still tucked in my belt—also helped to improve my mood immensely. Before we’d left that tiny town, I’d limped over to the unconscious female raider, taken her gun holster, and rummaged through her bag until I found three boxes of shells. So I had some ammo, at least. Shotgun wouldn’t have been my first choice, but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

After an hour or so of walking, Edin checked on me to make sure my leg was feeling okay. I rolled my eyes and told him bluntly that I was good. He made me drink some water, and I rolled my eyes again, even harder, but did it just to shut him up.

"Anyone ever tell you you're kinda bossy?" I asked as we continued walking, eyeing up the wide expanse of his bare back. I grew almost hypnotised watching the muscles in his back shift in the dim pink light as he walked. I told myself it was only because there was nothing else to look at.

Edin snorted. "Yes." He shot me a brief, arrogant glance over his shoulder, brow raised. "And I am assuming someone has told *you* that you are a bad-tempered bastard."

I choked on a surprised inhale, a laugh threatening to escape. I felt my lips try to curl, my scar tugging at the left side of my face. "All the time."

Edin chuckled, and his tail swished languidly behind him, the tip swaying dangerously close to some very sensitive goods of mine. "Hey. Watch the tail, old scratch," I jibed, remembering that weird old book of my grandma's again. Edin really did look like the devil in it.

Looking over his shoulder, he bared his fangs at me in what I assume was the monster version of a scowl. "I'm not *that* old."

I mean, he didn't *look* old, but it was kind of impossible to judge his age by human standards. "How old *are* you?"

He huffed. "Only around five and a half thousand or so."

My breath caught in my throat, making me choke. I coughed, spluttering. "You're *what*?"

"It's not that old," Edin shot back immediately, tone defensive. "I'm nowhere *near* as old as Wyn. He's over twelve thousand. *That's* old." He chuckled.

But I'd frozen, instinctive tension making my limbs seize up. "Wyn… Wyn the Soul Eater?"

Edin glanced back and, noticing I'd stopped, came to a halt too. "Yes. So?"

Chills raced through my gut. "*So?* So that monster is a fucking mass murderer," I gritted out. "He's slaughtered thousands of innocent humans."

To my total shock, Edin actually rolled his eyes. "I always forget humans think that." He chuckled. "There is a type of parasite from our

world that comes here and infects humans. Wyn is killing the parasites, not innocent humans. So calm down."

"Bullshit."

Edin shot me a quizzical look. "I assume that means you don't believe me, but it is not… *bool-sheet.* I'll show you, if we see one. I help Wyn by killing any I come across, although it's harder for me to spot them. And *much* messier for me to kill them. I don't have his abilities."

"Do you seriously expect me to believe this?" I asked him in a flat voice.

Edin's eyes went hard as he looked at me, but he just shrugged. "Doesn't matter to me whether you believe me or not, human. If you don't, I suppose I won't bother telling you the signs to look out for in an infected human."

I hesitated for a second, suddenly unsure. If there was any chance that what he was saying *was* true, then that would be useful information… But it was just too fucking unbelievable. "Don't bother," I said bluntly.

"Fine."

"Fine," I repeated, then felt like an idiot. I squared my shoulders and started walking again, brushing past Edin.

It was ridiculous, but I already missed the tentative truce we'd formed over the morning, regret gnawing in my gut that I'd been so short with him when we'd only just started getting along. But I was too fucking stubborn to apologise just yet. I wouldn't be able to say the same when I'd stewed over it for a few hours and the guilt ate away at me, but that was my normal M.O. Speak first, think and regret later. Ask for forgiveness if I cared enough.

For some weird reason, I could already tell that I cared enough about what this big annoying purple monster thought of me. That meant I was already feeling bad as we walked in silence, the easy camaraderie gone. I cast about for something to say that would get Edin talking again but wouldn't require me to apologise.

But I mean… Did he seriously expect me to believe that the military's number one enemy was actually saving humans from some unknown monster parasite species? That Wyn the Soul Eater—that creepy ghoulish monster with a hidden face and blackened fingers—was *protecting* humans?

Since the monsters had risen, I'd come to accept a lot of crazy shit. I'd *witnessed* a lot of impossible-seeming, batshit insane mindfuckery out here

in the Wastes.

But that? That was so ridiculous I wanted to laugh.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

In the end I couldn't think of anything to say, and we walked in silence for a while, me in front this time. I was numb from the monotony of the tunnels, just damp earth and pink light flaring and dimming as we walked. Occasionally there'd be a dark entrance offshooting from the main tunnel we were walking down, but they all looked exactly the same, and Edin never directed us into any of them.

Being underground made the eerie quietness almost overwhelming, pressing on my eardrums. We weren't even that deep—the slope from the surface hadn't been particularly steep—but it was like we were descending into the centre of the earth. It was too warm and claustrophobic, and the silence made it seem like we'd left the human world behind.

It meant that I heard the first faint sounds almost as soon as Edin did, even though his hearing was no doubt a million times better than mine. His fingers gripped my shoulder from behind, bringing me to a halt.

I nodded without turning to look at him. "Heard it," I muttered, no louder than a whisper.

We stayed still, listening. It was a very faint, high vibration, but there were some scratchy, rhythmic sounds that I worked out were voices, even though they were foreign to my ears.

Edin stepped close behind me, still gripping my shoulder, until I could feel the heat of him against my back and his long hair tickled my neck. "That's them," he murmured in my ear. "Sound travels well down here. We have to be very quiet."

I nodded, ears straining to take in the sounds. It was impossible to tell how close we were. Like Edin said, sounds travelled far down here, and the earth dampened everything. "Can you tell which way they are?" I asked in a whisper. We hadn't long passed another offshooting tunnel.

"Yes." Edin squeezed my shoulder once before dropping his hand and brushing past me. "Let's go."

We walked in silence, listening to the sounds getting gradually louder. Eventually, Edin glanced at me over his shoulder and jerked his chin towards a side tunnel to our left. I followed him down it, and the sounds got even louder in a rush. Edin stopped suddenly, and it took me a second to

notice the slope in front of him, leading into even deeper tunnels. We moved to the lower level slowly, keeping quiet, and Edin led me a few yards forward towards a faint glow. When we reached it, I realised it wasn't another clump of glowing mushrooms, but light shining up from a chamber beneath us.

When I looked down into it, my breath caught in my throat. There were *dozens* of kolebs milling about. They'd lit a big fire in the centre of the cave, and an unknown animal with stumpy legs and a snout was being turned on a spit over the flames. I furrowed my brow at it, confused. I thought Edin said they didn't eat meat?

But then a sound made me freeze dead. I stopped breathing, ears straining. A faint humming, in a low voice. I recognised the cadence… and the song. It was a song from the 1960s that Charlie liked. He'd told me the name of the band before, said it was his mom's favourite, but I couldn't remember it in that moment. My throat went tight. "That's Charlie." I had enough sense to whisper, even though my heart had started racing. "That's Charlie."

I looked around frantically, peering into the chamber beneath us, but I couldn't see him. I was breathing too fast, adrenaline making my limbs twitchy. Where was he? I could hear him. He was close—

"Here." Edin started moving, and he pulled me away from the hole and further down the tunnel. Faint pink glow emerged from a smaller hole low to the ground. This one looked more natural, and when I squatted down to peer inside, I almost choked on a breath.

Charlie. He was feet away below us, in a small, empty chamber behind some thick rusted metal bars. He was sitting back against the dirt wall with his head tilted back and his eyes shut, wrists bound in front of him, humming to himself. Relief rushed through me, making my limbs momentarily weak.

I was already scrambling to get down there, but Edin stopped me with a firm grip on my shoulder. "The kolebs have behamots with them," he murmured in my ear. *What?* I couldn't process his words, too frantic to get to Charlie. "I'll keep watch. If any of them start coming, you must get out the moment I tell you to. Yes?"

I nodded automatically, not listening, body vibrating under his grip. Edin hesitated for a second, before letting go, and I rushed forward like I was spring-loaded. I barely felt the impact of the short jump into the tiny

chamber, already rushing towards the cage as Charlie jolted in shock, eyes snapping open.

When he saw me, they widened to almost comical proportions. “Hunter,” he rasped, scrambling to his knees. I met him on the other side of the bars, squatting down. “I thought you were dead,” Charlie hissed. His bound hands reached between the bars and grabbed the front of my shirt. “I cried, you asshole!”

His hands were shaking, and his grey eyes went glassy in the weird pink light. He’d always been less emotionally stunted than me, and my chest got tight at the sight of it. “You know I’m like a cockroach,” I said, smiling at him. Damn hard to kill.

“You motherfucker.” Charlie shook his head. “How the hell did you get back out of that sinkhole?”

I made a face. “I’ll tell you later. Let’s get you out of here first.”

“You won’t be able to, man.” Charlie sounded matter-of-fact yet defeated. “I’ve been trying. There’s no way.” He held up his bound hands. “Managed to get free from these once, and they doubled down after that.”

I gritted my teeth, already eyeing up the cage. “We’re getting you out,” I told him, voice hard with determination. Charlie let go of my shirt so I could start feeling my way round the cage, trying to find any kind of lock or door in the low light.

“It’s fucking weird, man,” he told me in a whisper, watching me from inside the cage. I realised he’d had no one to talk to for days, so I didn’t tell him to shut up, even though there was a risk one of the monsters could hear us. “They’re keeping me bound but they’re like… treating me real good for a hostage. Giving me a lot of food and water. Letting me clean up. They haven’t touched me other than to move me.” He leaned closer. “And they keep encouraging me to like… exercise, I think? Hard to be sure because they don’t speak English. But the big ones are almost treating me like I’m their buddy or something. It’s fuckin’ weird.”

The big ones? What big ones? What did he mean? Confused fear shot through me. “Why?”

Charlie shrugged. “No idea, but it’s freaking me out.”

I swallowed, trying to decide whether to tell him what Edin had told me. About the kolebs’ pilgrimage and the sacrifices. There were probably some beliefs about how well a sacrifice had been treated, or something. *Tell him when we’re safely away from these tunnels,* the logical part of my brain

said. There was no point stressing him out even more while he was still caged.

“What’s with this fucking cage?” I hissed, getting hot with frustration as I ran my fingers over the bars frantically. Where was the door? A lock? How had they gotten Charlie into it?

Charlie shook his head. “There’s no door,” he whispered. “I told you, they’ve got these big fuckers with them now. One of them pushed me in here and drove bars up into the ceiling where the gap was, then forced them back down into the ground.”

I tried to work out what he meant. And again, what did he mean, they had big fuckers with them? I stayed squatting, staring at the bars. They extended from the ground to the ceiling, and I realised what Charlie meant. They’d been driven into both. Well, surely that meant I’d be able to get some of the bars out the same way, right?

“Which ones?” I asked Charlie, and he eyed me doubtfully but pointed at a couple of the bars.

I shuffled round and grabbed hold of one. Ignoring the lingering pain in my shoulders, I gritted my teeth and started trying to drive it up so it’d come free from the ground. My arms began to shake with the effort.

“Hunter, man—” Charlie shook his head, eyes sad. “The monster that put them there was… colossal. Freakishly strong. You won’t—”

“I will.” I doubled down, face going red with the strain, but the bar didn’t budge even an inch.

“Hunter.” Charlie shuffled across the cage and reached through the bars again to grab my arm. “They’ll start moving again soon. We’ll have a better chance then. I won’t be in this cage when we’re moving.”

“I’m getting you out,” I gritted out, still straining against the bar. Even if he was right, I couldn’t just leave him here. I couldn’t.

I could practically feel Charlie’s doubt, but he silently started helping me try to drive the bar up, his arms bulging with the effort. Even with both of us straining to lift it, it didn’t move an inch. I was sweating, and the pain in my shoulders from yesterday was returning, but I didn’t stop.

Charlie jumped violently when Edin’s deep voice suddenly rumbled from the hole I’d dropped down from. “Hunter, a behamot is coming. You need to get back up here *now*.”

“Who the fuck is that?” Charlie hissed, wide eyes turning up to the hole, but Edin wasn’t visible.

“Long story.” I strained even harder, grunting with the effort. “Fuck. Fuck! It won’t move.” My voice was rough with panic, and I could hear heavy thumping footsteps against the earth getting closer. My heart raced, pounding too hard in my chest.

“Hunter, go. *Go*.” Charlie’s voice was frantic. “They’re not hurting me but I don’t know what they’ll do if they catch you. Go. *Please.*”

“I’m not leaving without you.” It sounded so cliché, but I’d never meant anything more in my life. I couldn’t get this goddamn close to getting Charlie out only to leave him here in a fucking cage buried in the earth.

“Hunter.” Edin’s low voice held a hint of anger, but I ignored him. “*Come. Here.”*

“Don’t be an asshole,” Charlie hissed, shoving at me to try and get me to let go of the bar. “If I have to watch you die while I’m stuck in this cage, I’ll never fuckin’ forgive you.”

But it was too late. The footsteps thudded closer, and then there was a confused grunt, followed by a furious growl behind me. My back tensed up.

I heard Edin let out a low, frustrated sound from the hole. A second later, a pale purple form was dropping and thudding to the ground next to the cage. Edin lunged for the creature behind me with a snarl before I could even blink.

Charlie’s eyes went wide as he stared over my shoulder, and I spun round when I heard the sound of flesh hitting flesh. Hard, solid thumps and low growls and snarls. My breath caught. Edin was locked in a fight with a huge… thing. It was even taller than Edin was, and its skin was a dark grey, pebbled and rough like stone. And from the sounds Edin’s fists were making when they connected, it *was* like stone. Impenetrable. Rock solid.

The monster’s face was squashed, tusks jutting up from its lower jaw. It was snarling at Edin, grunting out low sounds that could have been a language, but I wasn’t sure. Edin grunted something back, voice strained. Maybe it was a language, then.

“I can’t fight him long, Hunter,” Edin grunted, voice shaking with the strain of holding back the behamot’s gigantic arms. “Get in the hole. Now. We’ll find another way to get Charlie.”

“Go.” Charlie’s voice made me jump. He shoved at me. “Go. Quick. Now.” We locked eyes. “You’ll think of something. You’ll get me out. I know you will.” He shot me a small smile.

My throat went tight, but then I had a sudden thought. I quickly fumbled with the dagger at my belt. I was guessing Charlie's bag and rifle were long gone. "Here." I handed him the blade. "You got somewhere to hide it?"

Charlie nodded. Even though it was stupid and wasted precious seconds, I reached through the bars and gripped his nape tight. "We'll get you out," I said, voice rough. "Stay strong, Charlie."

I straightened up. I wanted to help Edin, but I didn't know how much help I'd be against that hulking creature. Would shooting it even do anything? I fumbled for the shotgun, but Edin glanced over and shook his head, right before the creature's fist connected with his jaw and sent him flying. "No—gun," he panted. "Bring—more."

Fuck. He was right. Too loud. He'd stumbled close to me, so I grabbed his shoulder to try and pull him back towards the hole. "Come on."

"Get up there. I'll follow," Edin said as the behamot lumbered forward and tackled him. Edin grunted as they went down, and I stood there for a second like an idiot, panic making me freeze up.

"Go, jackass!" Charlie's voice kickstarted me back into action, and with a last glance at him, followed by a worried look at Edin, who was on the ground underneath the huge mass of the behamot, I made a running jump at the hole. I just managed to grab onto the edge of it. Ignoring the returning pain in my shoulders, I hoisted myself up.

"I'm up!" I called, the moment I was back in the higher tunnel. "I'm up!"

I watched as Edin snarled, managing to get his long legs under the creature. With a strained grunt, he heaved the thing off him with a double-footed kick to the gut. The behamot fell back with a surprised grunt, its weight making it topple onto its back for a stunned second. That was all it took for Edin to jump to his feet and take a running leap, like I had, toward the hole. I stumbled back out of the way as he heaved his big body up.

We were both panting, dazed, but Edin was already shoving me to get me moving. "They might come up after us," he told me. "We need to move."

I was trembling with worry as we hurried away from the hole. "Will they hurt Charlie?" I asked, unable to keep the fear out of my voice. "That thing—will it—"

"I don't know, Hunter." Edin's voice was soft, and even though it wasn't what I wanted to hear, I was glad he didn't just humour me with

meaningless reassurances. “If they haven’t yet, I doubt they’d start now. They obviously want him healthy and fit.”

So he’ll be a good sacrifice. I swallowed, feeling sick. Pressure was building in my head, behind my eyeballs, and I blinked fast as we walked. I couldn’t believe we’d been so close. So close to rescuing him. Self-loathing burned in my gut. I’d left him. I’d left Charlie in that fucking cage, with that giant monster who might—

“We couldn’t have gotten him from that cage,” Edin murmured, as if he knew what I was thinking. “You did everything you could, Hunter. We’ll try again. Charlie was right—it’ll be easier when they’re travelling again. Now we’ve caught up with them, we’ll have another opportunity soon.” His hand briefly gripped my shoulder from behind. “Don’t let it make you give up.”

“I’m not giving up,” I gritted out, voice hard. I wasn’t angry at Edin. Not at all. I was furious at myself—at my failure. “We’re getting Charlie back.”

I realised I’d said ‘we’ a second later, but I knew it was true. I knew Edin would help me, and I knew I’d need him. Gratitude swelled in me, and even though all I wanted to do was wallow in my failure to get Charlie, I forced myself to not be an asshole.

“Are you okay?” I asked Edin. My voice got rough. “I’m sorry.” God, I was fucking up at every turn. It was like I’d forgotten all my military training; all my expertise. “I should have moved when you told me to. I didn’t mean for you to have to fight—”

“It’s fine.” Edin squeezed my shoulder once more before letting go.

“But are you hurt?” I pressed. That monster had looked like a thick, hulking statue carved from rough stone. And it had been pummelling Edin really fucking hard.

“I’ll be a bit sore, but it’s nothing.” Edin chuckled. “Behamots are tough opponents, but not particularly smart. I’ve had run-ins with them before.”

That made me feel a bit better. I took a deep breath, my exhale trembling out of me. I thought of Charlie, sitting in that fucking cage. He’d been bound, but he’d looked okay. Healthy. He’d said they were feeding him and letting him wash and even encouraging him to stay fit. It was awful knowing why—especially when he didn’t—but at least he wasn’t being beaten or starved. At least I didn’t have to worry about him being tortured before we could rescue him. It was something.

“We’ll get him, right?” I said it before I’d even known I was going to speak. I wasn’t sure what made me ask. Maybe I wanted the reassurance

that Edin would stay and help me. Maybe I wanted to lock him into the promise.

"We'll get him," he agreed, his impossibly deep voice rumbling through me and lessening the tight knot of guilt and worry in my stomach. When Edin said it, I could believe it.

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CHAPTER NINE

Even though we hadn't managed to get him back, being able to see Charlie —to speak to him—had given me renewed optimism. As we set off after the troop of kolebs and behamots the next morning, back in the tunnels, I was more determined than ever.

We'd gotten out of the underground network the day before and set up camp nearby, so that Edin could keep watch in case anything came after us. Nothing had. It'd been dead quiet, but it had still taken me a long time to fall asleep.

I still felt more refreshed than I had the last couple of days as we walked through the dark tunnels again, following the faint sounds of the kolebs and behamots. They were being loud enough for us to realise they weren't worried about us following them. Maybe they really were that dumb. Or they didn't see us as a threat.

Still, I was in a better mood. I knew Charlie wasn't injured or starving or dying of thirst. And my leg felt better, my headache had finally gone, and despite straining to move that bar on Charlie's cage, my shoulders weren't tight with lingering pain.

"So those behamots," I asked Edin as we walked, keeping my voice low. "Do they normally travel with kolebs?"

Edin was walking in front of me. He shook his head, and I watched his hair shift over his muscled shoulders at the movement. "No, it's very strange. I've never seen them travel together."

"So behamots don't normally take part in the… sacrifice?" I still felt sick even saying the word.

Another head shake. "No. It's just kolebs." I saw Edin's head tilt thoughtfully. "And I heard Charlie say that the behamots have been treating him almost like a friend. And encouraging him to exercise and stay fit? It's odd."

"Yeah, that's weird." I readjusted the strap of my backpack. "But at least they aren't hurting or starving him."

"Yes. That is good. It gives us time." Edin glanced back at me over his shoulder, eyes uncharacteristically serious. "I don't think we will be able to

just rush in there and grab him, Hunter. Not with several behamots. They are… extremely hard to take down."

I grunted. "Can't I…" The words building in my throat felt wrong, and awful, but I still said them. "What if I just went in there and shot them all?" Edin stopped and turned to look at me, and I felt my face get hot under my mask. "I'd do it. To get Charlie."

Edin shook his head slowly. "Bullets will do nothing against behamots. Wouldn't even penetrate their skin." He looked at me, his oversized irises eerily intense. "Do you want to do that?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't *want* to. But I would." I squared my jaw and my shoulders, meeting his gaze boldly. "I'd do it if it was the only way to get Charlie back. And I'm not sorry about it."

Edin watched me for another long moment, before nodding his head once and turning back round to carry on walking. "You could eliminate the kolebs that way, but not the behamots," he eventually said, voice neutral.

I exhaled. "Fair enough."

Edin was silent for a moment. "You care for him very much. Charlie."

I nodded even though he couldn't see me. "He's my best friend. We've barely spent a day apart in twelve years. He's the only thing that's kept me sane out here."

Edin's head jerked in a nod. A second later, he looked back over his shoulder at me. "We'll get him back."

I nearly smiled, the scarred snarling side of my lip twitching behind my mask. "I know we will."

Edin faced forward again. "I know that if I ever get kidnapped by kolebs, I'd want someone as dogged as you coming after me."

I huffed. "Can't imagine you getting captured by anything."

Edin grunted. "You'd be surprised."

"Well, if you gain strength with age you must be almost as unbeatable as those behamots by now," I teased. I couldn't resist tacking on, "Old scratch."

Edin looked back to bare his teeth at me, and I almost smiled. "Alright, fine. Not old scratch. How about just scratch? You mind if I call you that?"

He shot me a wolfish grin. "You can call me whatever you want, human." His voice was a low rumble, somehow intensely intimate. My breath caught, and I felt my throat bob as I swallowed. I saw his big eyes track the movement before he turned to face forward again.

Something like desire coiled low in my belly as I stared at the back of him, and it made my heart thud hard in my chest. Fuck. Was I… I couldn't be *attracted* to him. Could I? That was crazy. And totally inappropriate, given the circumstances. It wasn't helping to calm my traitorous body when Edin looked at me like… like he was attracted to me too. Hell, he'd just been looking at me like he'd be down to get naked right here, right now if I gave him a sign.

Shit. This wasn't good.

We stopped talking as we picked up our pace so we could get closer to the group, to try and figure out how we'd be able to grab Charlie. It would have been much easier if we weren't in these goddamn tunnels, because we could only come up behind them. Which meant if Charlie was anywhere near the front, we'd be useless.

"So how *do* you take out a behamot?" I eventually asked as we trudged through the darkness. I was fully prepared to use my shotgun to take out the kolebs if it came to it, but that wouldn't do much good if we couldn't also get rid of the big fuckers.

Edin grunted. "Pushing them off a very great height is the easiest method. Their bodies tend to shatter that way."

I gave the back of his head a look so salty he surely felt it. I'd never heard a less useful piece of information. "We're in a fucking tunnel. Underground."

Edin snorted. "Yes. But you asked."

I took a deep breath so I didn't snap at him. "Is there another way?" My voice was tight. "A way that's actually possible down here?"

Edin made that little grunting sound. "Mm. Fire. If they're exposed to fire hot enough, that will destroy them."

Well, it wasn't the *most* helpful, seeing as starting a fire while we were also trapped down here didn't seem like a very smart thing to do, but it was something. I grunted to acknowledge his words, but my mind was already turning the information over, trying to think of a plan.

"Are they *scared* of fire?" I asked after a few minutes. Maybe if we got a torch, we could hold them back while we grabbed Charlie.

Edin snorted. "They're too dumb to be scared of anything."

I deflated. Damn. “How are we going to even stop them, then? Can we distract them?” I looked at the back of Edin’s head. “Do you have any ideas?”

He glanced over his shoulder to shoot me an arrogant grin. “No, but I’m sure I’ll come up with something.”

My blood pressure spiked. “We need a *plan*,” I snapped, only just remembering to keep my voice low. “We can’t just go in there half-cocked.”

“You mean like you did yesterday?” Edin’s voice was infuriatingly smug.

I went hot all over. “I was—That was an ideal opportunity to try and get him out,” I argued, tone overly defensive. “He was alone in there—”

“Mm.”

My blood boiled at that imperious little sound, but I clenched my jaw and kept quiet, trying to control my temper. Getting angry at Edin would help nothing. It certainly wouldn’t help Charlie.

Edin looked back over his shoulder at me again, and this time his eyes were more serious. “You should prepare yourself for the fact that we may not be able to get to him down here, Hunter,” he told me, and I stiffened up, already opening my mouth to argue when he continued. “If he’s not near the back of the group, we won’t be able to get to him. They will have to leave the tunnels at some point. And we’re right on their tail now. We can watch and assess when is a good time. Yes?”

I clenched my hands into fists, wanting to argue. I took a breath through my nose, forcing myself to turn his words over before I just flung them back. “We have to at least try,” I eventually gritted out.

Edin stopped and turned to face me. He nodded. “And we will. If we can. But we are bottle-necked down here. You must know it isn’t the best situation to be in.” He raised a brow at me. “You will be no good to Charlie if a behamot squashes you like a bug.”

I balked, standing up straighter. “They can fucking try.”

Edin chuckled, folding big arms over his chest. I saw his eyes roam over my frame. “They can, and they will. And no matter how big and strong you are, human, they will succeed.” His lips quirked. “Even Wyn has had a close call with a couple of behamots. I had to help him, and even then we only narrowly got away. I had to rip my arm off. One of them had it pinned beneath them while they were trying to tear my guts out.”

I gaped at him, trying to process all the words he'd just thrown at me. "I—You ripped your own arm off?"

He chuckled again. "Yes, but you're missing the point." He reached out and gripped my shoulder. "We will not win against behamots, Hunter. So we have to be very, very careful getting Charlie out of there. Yes?"

So we had to be stealthy. No guns-blazing, barrelling-right-in-there approach. I exhaled. "I understand."

Despite acknowledging the fact that Edin was thinking logically, I was still devastated when he turned out to be right. The group of monsters stopped for a break, giving us a chance to scope the situation out. Charlie was being escorted near the front, between two of the big guys who were grunting at him, patting him on the back like they were pals, laughing jovially.

What the fuck were they doing?

It meant we couldn't sneakily grab him. There were a dozen kolebs and four more behamots between him and us. I wondered if Charlie had been able to hide the dagger I'd given him; if they hadn't found it on him yet. Not that it would do him much good, but I still felt better knowing he had it. I was sure he did too.

The group of monsters set off again not long after, and we continued following them until they stopped for the night. This time, instead of retreating to the surface, we camped out in the tunnels, Edin promising to stay awake and keep watch.

I'd just managed to drop off, huddled uncomfortably against the dirt wall, when Edin jostled me awake. His big hand covered my mouth the moment my eyes opened. "Silent," he whispered in my ear.

I went still under his hands, ears straining, heart starting to thud hard against my breastbone. It spasmed a moment later when a wet scuttling sound reached us, terrifyingly close. The noise sent instinctive fear spiralling through me, like the time the kid next door to my grandma's house had showed me his dad's pet Goliath birdeater when I was nine. He wasn't supposed to touch it, but he'd taken it out of its enclosure and set it on the carpet.

I'd almost pissed myself when it had run towards me. The noise its legs had made rubbing against its huge, fat body was what this sounded like—

only this was louder. Bigger. My vision whited out momentarily as I pictured a human-sized tarantula just around the tunnel's bend. My chest was heaving, breath hot and fast as I panted against Edin's hand, staring into the darkness, expecting to see the start of a huge, hairy leg emerge. I'd seen insect- and arachnid-like monsters before, but never when stuck in a dark, claustrophobic tunnel with no easy escape. And besides, it didn't really matter how many monsters you faced. Sometimes, baser instincts still reared and sent pure terror shooting through your body.

Edin was stiff beside me, one hand still covering my mouth while the other held my leg in an almost painful grip. But neither of us wanted to move an inch. The fact that Edin was this tense made me anxious. Did he know what the thing was? It wasn't like I could even ask him.

The rustling sound stopped, just long enough for some of the tension to start leeching from my limbs. The oppressive silence of the tunnel felt even louder after straining my ears. My breaths sounded impossibly loud, and I thought for sure I'd given us away.

Then, in a flurry, the sound returned, louder and faster. Edin grew even tenser a second before the creature appeared, filling the tunnel with its huge body.

I might have made a noise. I wasn't sure. It was a monster I hadn't seen before, and it was horrifying. Like a cross between a beetle and a scorpion, but the size of a cow. It stood on six black, segmented legs, three of which were halfway up the tunnel wall, gripping it to keep it elevated. But its head was what caused intense, visceral fear to shoot through me. At first glance it looked like a human's head stuck to a giant insect's body, which was horrifying enough on its own. But I quickly realised that the two small holes where a human's nostrils would be were its eyes, like the shiny pinprick eyes of a scorpion. Its mouth hung open, a bottomless black hole, but as its gaze locked on us a long, thin black tongue slithered out in a curling tendril, like it was tasting the air.

Its body lowered as it drew up energy to lunge. As I reached back to grab my gun in an explosion of movement, hoping to move quicker than it did, Edin shoved me back and blocked me with his big body. I heard an inhuman snarl leave his mouth when the thing collided with him. I barely managed to dive out of the way as Edin was shoved back, crashing into the tunnel wall, the creature's legs frantically wriggling in its desire to get him.

Fuck fuck fuck. I tried to alternate between fumbling for my gun and looking to see if Edin had been hurt. He was grappling with it, trying to keep the thing's long tail with a needle-sharp stinger away from him. His head jerked repeatedly to dodge out of its way.

At least his move gave me time to grab my gun and cock it. It was a pump-action shotgun, which meant I'd have to be careful with my shots because I doubted this thing was going to patiently wait for me to reload it constantly. I tried to remember how many shells I had in my bag, but couldn't think of anything in that moment beyond trying to make sure both of us survived.

Every muscle in Edin's body bunched, gathering power before he raised a leg and booted the creature in the abdomen. It shot back with a screech, landing on its back, legs wriggling sickeningly in the air. I aimed my gun at its sternum, firing off a shot before it could flip itself over, my ears ringing from the sound of the gunfire. I assumed its underbelly would be its weak spot, and I was right. It let out a louder shriek and jerked, but still scrambled back onto its front and prepared to lunge again. A fat, milky bead of venom was hanging suspended from the sharp tip of its stinger, quivering with the creature's movements, threatening to fall.

I fired off another shot, aiming for its creepy human-like face, but it jerked to the side at the last second and avoided it. My ear drums were throbbing from the gun fire.

"Get behind me, Hunter." Edin shoulders and biceps swelled as he clenched his fists. "Don't let its stinger get near you."

I ignored the order to get behind him. "Get it on its back again," I said, scrambling back as the creature decided to change tack and stab its tail through the air towards us rather than risk another kick.

When it missed both of us, its tail darted forward again, narrowly missing Edin's shoulder and making my heart stop for a second. But then Edin's big hand shot up and grabbed the thing, just underneath that stinger swollen with venom. A fat drop dripped onto the dirt at his feet. I could have sworn I heard the ground hiss at the contact.

My heart was thundering in my chest, hands sweaty but still steady when I raised my shotgun. The creature was shrieking with rage, legs scrabbling as it tried to yank its tail free, but Edin let out a grunt as he heaved and managed to flip the thing over once more with a forceful twist of its tail.

I fired again, nailing it in the sternum for a second time, seeing brown blood splatter, then immediately scrambled to reload. “Can you keep hold?” I asked, eyes darting between Edin’s grip on the thing’s tail and my fingers as I reloaded the shotgun. It was thrashing, trying to twist back round, and I could see the strain of keeping hold of its tail in Edin’s features.

He shot me a tight nod. “Not for too long.”

That stinger swivelled, and the tip darted terrifyingly close to the smooth lavender skin of Edin’s shoulder. My stomach dropped as I cocked the gun and aimed, firing off three rounds in quick succession. It was definitely weakening, and its sternum was starting to look like a dark brown mushy mess, but its legs still flailed as it screeched.

As I reloaded again, Edin took a step closer to the creature and pinned the thicker part of its tail, closer to its body, under his boot. I saw him start straining to literally rip the tail free from its body. There was a sickening wet tear as it started to come loose.

“Be careful,” I barked as the stinger jerked down again, the monster desperately trying to get to Edin’s bare skin, its legs wriggling frantically in the air. Its body suddenly jerked and it screeched a sound that made me wince as Edin tore the tail completely free from the creature’s body, brown goo gushing. The monster convulsed, and its separated tail twitched with death throes in Edin’s hands until he threw it away from us.

My heart was racing, but the adrenaline had always helped me to focus, so I was calm and steady as I raised the shotgun once again. It only took two more shots for its sternum to collapse entirely into a thick brown goo, shards of exoskeleton jutting up. Its legs curled up into its body, a faint hiss emitting as it died.

I was panting, sweating as I kept the gun pointed at the creature for another ten seconds. When it didn’t move, I lowered it slowly. Before I could even take a breath, though, Edin was shoving me—towards the hideous creature. “What the fu—”

“They heard us. Behamots are coming. We have to go.”

My heart gave a lurch as I realised, through the ringing in my ears, that I could hear a new sound reverberating through the tunnels—heavy thumping footsteps, coming up behind us fast. The other monsters had heard the fight. “Shit.”

We took off, edging round the dead monster and running through the stifling tunnels until Edin’s hand on my shoulder jerked me to a stop as we

reached a surface entrance. I scrambled up, Edin's hands shoving me to move faster as we heard the behamots grunting to each other from where we'd been just moments before. They'd seen the dead creature.

We scrambled up to the surface. It was night, and pitch black. The moon was new, so I was literally blind as I looked around wildly. Luckily Edin could see in the dark. He tangled his fingers with mine and pulled me along in a run. My heart was racing as we pounded over wet grass, but at least my vision was slowly adjusting. Enough for me to see that Edin was pulling me towards what looked like a cabin at the edge of a forest, trees looming up behind it.

The hunting cabin was dilapidated, but at least it still had its front door that Edin shoved me through before following. The air was dusty in here. I couldn't see much as I tried to catch my breath.

I spun and blindly reached out to grab Edin, patting him down, trying to feel for injuries. "Are you okay? Did it get you? Are you hurt?"

Edin stilled my hands in a gentle grip. "I am fine, Hunter. It didn't get me."

I exhaled in relief, resting my hand against Edin's big, solid pec for just a moment, oddly comforted by the smooth heat of his skin beneath my fingers. Then I patted his chest once and let go. "Good." I tripped on an old rug as I stepped away from the door. "Think the behamots will follow us out?"

"Unlikely, but there is a chance. They'll know someone was down there. They saw the dead mortik."

"Mortik. Is that what that thing was?" I asked, rubbing a hand over my chest as my heartrate slowed.

Edin nodded, peering out of the cabin's grimy window. "Very unpleasant."

I almost choked on a breath. "Yeah, no shit. Why the fuck did its head look almost like a human face?" I shuddered. "Creepiest shit I've seen in a while."

"Mm." Edin exhaled and rested a shoulder on the wall beside the window. "They are opportunistic hunters, normally, that lure their prey in. Very adept at camouflaging themselves. I think we startled that one." He glanced over at me. "I've come across one before back in our world. It still had those face-looking features on its head, but less human than this one. They've adapted since coming here."

I swallowed. “Well that’s… unsettling.” I took off my hat to scrub a hand over my head, wiping away the cooling sweat. “Guess we hole up here tonight and go back down in the morning. Do mortiks travel alone or in packs?”

“Normally alone, but it’s not uncommon to see a small group travelling together.” Edin shot me a brief nod. “Best to stay here tonight, as you said. They’re nocturnal. And the behamots will have stopped caring by morning.” He snorted. “They don’t have extensive attention spans.”

I exhaled and squinted deeper into the cabin. It was dark, but I was able to make out basic shapes, so I carefully stepped my way over to the couch.

“I’ll keep watch.” Edin’s low voice rumbled through me as I eased off my backpack and shotgun and placed them on the couch. “You get some sleep.”

“Don’t know if I can sleep after that,” I told him bluntly, but I still sank down and rubbed at my left knee. My body was tired, but my brain was wired after that monster attack, the lingering effects of the adrenaline rush making me jittery. I pulled off my mask and hat, wiping a tired hand down my face.

After drinking some water and forcing down a protein bar, I heaved myself back up off the couch and joined Edin at the window. “Anything?”

He shook his head. “No. I don’t think they’ll leave the tunnels to look for us. I doubt they care that much.” He looked over at me, his big eyes gleaming in the dark. When he reached over and scrubbed a hand over the back of my head, pleasure dipped low in my belly. “Try and sleep, Hunter. We will have another long day of walking tomorrow.”

I hesitated. “We can take watch in shifts. I know you like sleeping—”

“No.” Edin shook his head. “I can go perfectly fine without. I don’t need it. You do.” He jerked his chin towards the couch and shot me a crooked smile. “Stop arguing and go.”

I rolled my eyes at his imperious tone, but did what he said. I needed to sleep, and knew it would be stupid not to. As I lay down on the couch, exhaling hard and trying to find a comfy spot for my head on the overstuffed arm, the adrenaline rush wore off and I crashed surprisingly fast.

Knowing Edin was keeping watch meant my brain could relax. I managed to force the images of that giant scorpion-like creature with a

human face out of my mind and go to sleep, Edin’s presence settling over me like a blanket.

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CHAPTER TEN

We headed back into the tunnels the next morning, retracing our steps to keep following the monster group. The mortik's corpse was gone, which was… insanely unsettling. I asked Edin if there was something down here that would eat it, and the slightly uneasy smile he shot me stopped me from asking any more questions.

For the next couple of days, we quietly followed the group through the tunnels, keeping an eye on Charlie when we could get close enough, which was normally when they set up camp to eat and rest. They really were treating him well, and it was still strange to witness even though we thought we knew why. A healthy, well-fed sacrifice would surely mean more to their god than a weak, malnourished one in the kolebs' eyes. It made me feel sick, but also made me all the more determined to get him.

We'd headed to the surface for me to rest the night after the mortik attack, but then we didn't come across another surface entrance that brought us out near any buildings. Which meant on the third morning, I told Edin that we needed to find a place where I could replenish my supplies. I needed more water—I'd gotten through my canteen and the last of my military-issued hydration packets—and was running low on food. We agreed to head up to find somewhere for the night once the kolebs set up camp, and followed them for the rest of the day.

This time, however, something changed. As we followed them, we heard the kolebs' chatter get louder and more frantic. They were a noisy bunch anyway, constantly jabbering to each other as they travelled, with the behamots' grunting accompanying their annoying voices. But this was different.

"Wait here," Edin murmured to me. "I'll go and see what's happening."

"No," I hissed back. "I'll go. I'll be less conspicuous."

Edin balked. "What do you mean? I can—"

"I'm not pale purple and half-naked, scratch." I shoved at his arm. "I'm dressed in dark clothing, and most of my face is covered. I'll be able to hide better."

Edin's jaw ticked as he stared at me, his craggy face throwing sharp shadows in the glimmering pink light from the mushrooms. At length, he

nodded once. “Fine. But be careful. Be silent. Don’t get too close.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know what I’m doing.”

I was already moving forward when I heard him whisper, “If you’re not back in five minutes I will come looking for you.”

I waved a hand to acknowledge I’d heard him and continued forward, moving slowly and sticking to the dirt wall, readjusting my mask and pulling my cap lower on my forehead to hide more of my pale skin. I inched round a bend and held my breath when movement caught in my periphery. The kolebs were disappearing up a slope, scrambling up quickly, using their weird two-fingered hands to scale the dirt. They were going to the surface.

One of the behamots hefted Charlie up onto the slope and pushed him up with rough hands, but it didn’t seem to be trying to hurt him. Still, Charlie glared at him over his shoulder. “Watch it, buddy.”

Shit. I hurried back to Edin, moving as quickly and quietly as I could. “They’re going to the surface,” I whispered the moment his demon-like face came into view, sharp shadows being thrown across his features from the glow of the mushrooms.

He blinked in surprise, then nodded once. “Let’s go.”

We edged forward and waited for the stragglers to go up the slope to the surface. “How do we follow them without them seeing us?” I whispered. We had no idea where we’d emerge. I had no idea where we were anymore, we’d been travelling underground for so long.

“We have to wait,” Edin murmured. “I’ll be able to smell which way they’ve gone.” He squeezed my shoulder briefly. “I know it’s frustrating but it’s the safest thing to do.”

I huffed out a breath, but he was right. The minutes ticked by agonisingly slowly as we waited in the tunnel. As well as following them, I was desperate to breathe fresh air and see the sun again. It felt like I’d never get the sickly, loamy scent of dirt out of my nose.

I wasn’t sure how long we waited, but Edin insisted on going first in case anything bad waited for us on the surface. When he called down to me a minute later, I scrambled up the slope as fast as I could. Cool air hit me, and I exhaled, pulling off my mask to feel it on my whole face the moment I was upright on the grass.

The first thing I noticed was the barn to our left, its once red paint faded to pale pink and peeling off in big flakes. Green fields stretched out for

miles around us, some patches still growing corn in clumps. It was nearly dusk, so the sky was turning pink and orange. I wondered where in the Wastes we were now.

"Which way?" I asked Edin, turning to look at him. He was frowning, gaze unfocused. "Scratch?" I asked uncertainly when he didn't respond.

He snapped out of it, shooting me a brief grin. "That way." He tilted his head just beyond my shoulder. "But do you want to see if there's anything to scavenge in the farmhouse first?"

"Oh." I looked over at it, sitting beyond the barn. Impatience made me want to say no and just set off after the group, but I knew it was the smart thing to do. "Fine." As we started walking towards the house, I glanced over at him with a frown. "What were you just thinking about?"

Edin looked back at me, brows still pulled down a little. "They've gone the wrong way."

I stared at him with a confused frown. "Huh?"

"They've gone the wrong way," Edin repeated, sounding contemplative. "They've travelled away from the tear. Not towards it."

"What?" I stopped and turned to face him fully. "So where are they going? Where are they taking Charlie?" I couldn't keep the panic out of my voice.

"I don't know." Edin shook his head. "But the tear is in the northern-most part of Texas." He gestured at the fields. "I'm not sure where we are exactly, but I know we are nowhere near there. We've gone north."

My brain churned as I stared back at him. I despised not having any answers. "Are they… Could there be another tear?" I asked uncertainly.

Edin shook his head again. "There isn't another on this continent."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

I started to pace, reaching up and pulling off my hat to scrub a hand through my sweaty hair. "So where are they taking him, then? What do they want him for?"

I couldn't yet be relieved that they might not be planning to use Charlie as a sacrifice after all, because the alternative could be far, far worse. At least before, we'd thought we'd known what their plan was—and therefore what their movements would be. If they weren't taking Charlie to the tear, where the fuck *were* they taking him?

“I don’t know, Hunter.” Edin gestured at the farmhouse, encouraging me to get walking again. I did so numbly. “But we will get him back before they get to wherever they’re taking him. Don’t worry.”

I couldn’t do anything *but* worry. I worried as we poked through the rotting farmhouse, refilling my canteen and grabbing a box of dry crackers. I worried as we set off after the kolebs, walking through old corn fields as the sun set. We were finally out of the tunnels, but I didn’t feel any better. While we’d been down there, it had been easy to convince myself that if only they’d take Charlie to the surface, it would be so simple to grab him. Now that they were up here, it still felt like an almost impossible task.

I gritted my teeth as we walked, cycling back through the information Edin had shared with me about the behamots and kolebs. If I had to start a big fucking fire and burn all of them to get Charlie back, I’d do it.

The group of monsters set up camp at the edge of a forest when it got dark, starting another fire. They obviously weren’t all that worried about attracting any predators. Edin told me the kolebs were most likely feeling cocky because they had behamots with them. The same reason why, if they did suspect us of following them after our thwarted attempt to get Charlie a few days ago, they weren’t all that bothered.

They set Charlie up by the fire, which meant he was lit up like a beacon and would be impossible to grab without anyone seeing us. Edin and I watched from the forest, and I managed to grab a few hours of uncomfortable sleep, propped against a tree with arms folded and chin on my chest, as Edin kept watch. I woke up in the grey dawn light, clothes feeling a little damp from morning dew.

The kolebs were just waking up too, a few of them preparing some kind of mushroom stew over the fire and another skinning an animal with a disgusted look on its weird little face, several more piled up beside it waiting for their turn. So they were obviously taking care of feeding the behamots then. Was it in exchange for something? The behamots’ protection, maybe? But from what?

Two behamots were grunting at each other next to Charlie, who was already awake. He looked a little tired, but one of the kolebs had handed him a cup of water, which he was sipping. Edin told me in a hushed voice

that the behamots had been there all night. Unlike Edin, they did need to sleep, and they'd done so in shifts like the kolebs. They hadn't even left Charlie alone to go to the bathroom, at least three behamots accompanying him at all times.

When they set off, we followed them at a safe enough distance to be able to talk. "Why aren't they using the tunnels anymore?" I asked Edin. Not that I wasn't grateful to be out of them.

"I would guess that there aren't any up here," Edin said. "The kolebs will have made their tunnel network to the tear and the places they inhabit in this world. I've only ever seen them down the way we were before—never up here. They probably haven't made any yet."

I exhaled. "And I'm guessing they feel confident travelling above-ground because of the behamots."

Edin nodded. We were side by side now that we were out of the narrow tunnels. Our arms brushed occasionally as we walked, and I couldn't help but notice how hot Edin's skin was. I glanced over at him, and my eyes snagged on his tiny nipples. They were a dark brownish purple, which was kind of weird, but also…

My belly swooped and I looked away again quickly, clearing my throat. "Not that I'm complaining," I said. "I'll be happy if I never have to set foot in those fuckin' tunnels again."

Edin chuckled. "Yes, it's nice to be out of them." He shot me a smirk. "Although now you won't be able to stare at my ass all day as we walk."

I choked on a breath, cheeks getting hot even as I glared at him. At least the lower half of my face was covered behind my mask. "In your dreams, scratch."

"Mm." His big eyes gleamed as he side-eyed me. "Yes."

Wait, what? My breath caught, but I refused to look over at him as we walked. Was he saying that yes, he *had* dreamed about… that? Or…

I swallowed, resisting the urge to shake my head to try and get rid of the thoughts suddenly crowding it. What did Edin mean? What had he dreamt about? Was he… Had he dreamt about me doing something to his *ass*?

Fuck. My eyeballs practically strained with the desire to peek back and look at it. I could see his long tail swishing lazily in my periphery as we walked. I suddenly starting wondering whether Edin wore anything underneath that kilt. Somehow, I doubted it. That didn't help the direction of my thoughts.

I cleared my throat and stared hard at the tiny dots of the koleb group ahead of us, forcing myself to focus on them, and not on the heat emanating from the big, muscular purple body beside me. But it was difficult. Only a few minutes later, my mind drifted again. I tried to remember the last time I'd had sex.

A couple of years, at least. Charlie and I had been on a job in one of the coastal cities, which didn't happen often. I'd hooked up with someone who'd approached me in a shitty bar we'd gone in. I couldn't even remember what they looked like.

Charlie had complained about how hard up he was as we'd trekked towards the Nebraska base from Minnesota. I'd silently agreed with him, but my body had gone dormant since he'd been taken, too focused on worrying for him and trying to get him back. Now, though… Now, I was hyper-aware of the half-naked specimen of ultra-masculine perfection walking beside me. Edin looked like he could be carved from marble by one of those ancient sculptors. I still tried to convince myself that it was jealousy I felt when I looked at him, but it was getting harder to keep that up.

I hadn't ever realised I'd be into someone who was bigger than me. Taller *and* stronger. Because I'd never come across it before. I'd always been the one in control. The one who had to be careful because of my size. The one who'd done all the work, so to speak.

With Edin, I wouldn't have to worry about that. The thought popped into my head unbidden, and I pushed it away just as fast.

I glanced over at him again. His face was so inhuman—craggy and rough-hewn, his features almost too harsh. His eyes had taken a while to get used to. Bigger in proportion to the rest of his face, and with irises twice the size of a human's.

He truly did look demonic, but altogether it was… pleasing. His face was so interesting to look at. And so expressive. Edin didn't hide anything. He was like an open book, but one written in a language I'd only just started to learn. We'd spent enough time together now for me to start getting used to his mannerisms, his thought processes, both of which were nothing like a human's. We still bickered, and I still got frustrated with how freaking laidback he was *all the time*. But a tiny little kernel of affection was growing in my gut for the big annoying monster. I hated to admit it, because it was a weakness, but I knew that I'd actually *care* if something

happened to him. I'd care if he got hurt. The only other person in the world I cared about was Charlie, so it was fairly jarring for me to acknowledge.

We walked in comfortable silence, used to one another's presence now. This time, the koleb group walked through the night and for most of the next day, and my distracted thoughts faded as I grew more and more worried for Charlie. Every time I caught sight of him, I could see him stumbling over his own feet. I knew how tired he was, because I was too. I was exhausted.

They stopped as dusk approached, setting up camp just outside of a small town. I would have given my left nut for a shower at this point, and a chance to remove my prosthetic and tend to my leg, so Edin and I stealthily made our way to the tiny motel on the edge of the town.

After we found two rooms, Edin said he'd go back and keep watch while I showered and rested for a bit. I watched his big purple form lope off before heading into my room. The air inside was hot and stuffy, so I opened the window before dumping my bag and the shotgun on the bed. Reaching up to pull off my hat and massage the nape of my neck, I wandered over to the dresser when I spotted some ancient flyers sitting on it, which finally let me know where we were—Iowa. The one on top had a picture of the gold-domed State Capitol Building in Des Moines on the front. So Edin was right. The kolebs were heading *away* the tear, if it was in Texas. Where were they going?

I stripped down and sat on the edge of the bed to take off my prosthetic. My leg ached, but I'd been careful about making sure it didn't rub, and we'd been taking regular breaks. It was in much better condition than it had been that first day, in no small part down to Edin ordering me to rest and not push myself to the point of incapacity. I had to admit—though never actually *to* him—that I was grateful for him making me take breaks. Didn't mean he wasn't still a big, overbearing oaf though.

There was an old bar of soap in the bathroom, and I used it to wash up, scrubbing myself down with it twice. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd been able to shower, but I knew I'd smelled pretty ripe the last couple of days of travelling.

I had an old electric razor in my bag that Charlie and I used on the road when we could, and I'd plugged it in to charge before I showered. I used it to shave my face and buzz my hair down short, relieved to be rid of the tangled mess that had itched under my ball cap. I felt refreshed and better

than I had in days as I hopped back into the bedroom and pulled on a clean pair of boxer briefs before sitting on the edge of the bed to sort out my leg. After smoothing ointment over my stump, I pulled on the sleeve and fitted my prosthetic.

I'd just stood back up and was reaching for my pants when Edin barrelled into the room. "Hunter—"

He stopped dead, staring at me. It would have made me self-conscious about my leg if my stomach hadn't dropped with panic. "What's wrong? Is it Charlie? What's happened?"

"What?" Edin blinked, and then his brow cleared as he raised his eyes to meet mine. "Oh, no. Nothing. Nothing's happened."

I sagged with relief, turning to face him with my hands on my hips. I'd been in the military too long to give a shit about standing in front of him in my underwear. "Then what?"

Edin blinked again, before a slow, dangerous smile curved one corner of his mouth. When he sauntered closer, I swallowed and barely refrained from taking a hesitant step back.

"I just wanted to make sure you were alright." His voice was even deeper than normal, rumbling through me as he stopped just a couple of feet away.

I cleared my throat, becoming painfully aware of my near-naked state in a rush. It was still him seeing my leg in full, though, that made me uncomfortable—until I realised he hadn't even glanced at it. Not once.

No, his eyes were greedily taking in the light covering of hair on my chest, before dropping to follow the trail from my navel that disappeared into my underwear. His head cocked, eyelids heavy and overly big eyes gleaming with… something. "Do all humans have this?" His voice was raspy.

I swallowed, stomach tightening. "Have what?"

A fang worried one corner of Edin's lower lip. He reached out. My breath caught in my throat when fingertips brushed featherlight over the trail of hair below my navel.

"This," Edin rumbled.

Oh shit. I was frozen, knowing I should move away, but I couldn't. Edin glanced up and met my eyes, his fingertips still resting on my lower stomach, and something sparked between us.

“I…” I licked my lips, but it only made me tense up more when Edin’s eyes dropped to follow the movement. “Not all, no,” I managed to get out, but I sounded like I’d been eating gravel.

“Mm.” Edin let out his little rumbling noise from his throat. When those fingertips moved, brushing over my skin, my heart started hammering in my chest. I felt my dick twitch, and my face went hot when I realised it would be *extremely* obvious if I started getting hard right now.

Edin’s lips curved back up into a smirk, and I couldn’t tell if I was relieved or disappointed when those fingers drew up—away from my dick—and feathered lightly over the short hair between my pecs. “I like it,” he rumbled, his big pupils widening as he looked at me.

“I…” My heart was racing, and sweat prickled at my hairline. “Uh… good,” I said lamely, mouth dry and brain totally empty from Edin’s proximity. When his big eyes dropped back down towards my lower body, I jerked back and almost stumbled on my prosthetic. “So I, uh… Let me get dressed and we’ll go keep watch.” I was rambling as I fumbled with my pants.

Edin let out a little sound of amusement. “You need to sleep first,” he told me.

I shook my head. “It’s okay, I—”

“Hunter,” Edin barked. “You’re going to sleep. They’re not moving for a while. I will keep watch.” He grunted. “We are unlikely to get an opportunity to grab Charlie while it’s still light, anyway.”

I hesitated, clutching my pants in my fists. “But what if—”

“Get into bed, Hunter.”

The low rasp of his voice throbbed through me. I cleared my throat and tried to subtly hold my pants in front of my crotch. “Alright, fine,” I grunted, but didn’t move.

When Edin didn’t either, staring at me with an arrogant, expectant arched brow, I made a face and jerked my chin towards the door. “I’m not getting into bed with you leering at me, scratch.” I raised a brow back at him. “Or is this just an excuse for *you* to stare at *my* ass.” I wasn’t sure what made me say it, but my stomach lurched with anticipation when I did.

Edin just chuckled. “I don’t need an excuse to do that, human. But I would appreciate a look at it while you’re not wearing pants.”

Pleasure fizzed in my gut, and I felt the scarred side of my lip twitch. “Damn perv.” But something snagged me, and with a bold look at Edin I

dropped my pants on the carpet and turned towards the bed. “Bye, Edin,” I threw over my shoulder as I pulled back the covers. I could *feel* his eyes on my ass, and my cock twitched.

He let out a low, growling sound that slid through me and made my dick firm up in a rush. When I heard the door open and close a moment later, and felt his presence leave the room, I couldn’t help but grin to myself.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

I was inspecting my shotgun, chewing on a piece of jerky hanging out the side of my mouth, as we sat between the trees watching the monster camp a few hours later. They'd definitely set up to stay for the night this time, and I was glad that meant Charlie would be able to rest.

They'd placed him right next to the fire again, so all we could do was watch. The behamots were still treating him like an old buddy, encouraging him to eat with them. The kolebs had come across a small flock of wild chickens roosting in some nearby bushes earlier. A couple of them were plucking the birds with their weird, two-clawed hands while another turned the roasting meat over the fire as they chattered in their shrill language. At least Charlie was getting some protein. My stomach rumbled at the smell of real meat cooking, and I chewed on my jerky morosely.

I avoided looking at Edin, because every time I did I felt his fingers on my skin again, achingly close to my dick. I *had* done a quick take of his frame when he'd met me outside my room after I'd slept, and I'd realised that he didn't have any body hair, not even on his legs, which went some way towards explaining why he was fascinated by mine.

"What about a distraction tactic?" I whispered to Edin after a while. He was sitting close by, leaning back against a tree, his long tail swishing lazily back and forth over the grass.

His big head rolled over the trunk to look at me, eyes gleaming in the faint light from the kolebs' fire. "Like what?"

I chewed on the last bit of jerky. "Like we make a loud noise in one direction and grab Charlie from the other when they all go to see what it was?"

Edin snorted softly with amusement, which made my fists clench. "Why would they *all* go see what made a noise?"

"I don't know," I snapped, remembering to keep my voice hushed. "But I don't hear you coming up with *any* ideas, scratch. We're just sitting here like fucking chumps."

"Hunter." Edin's voice was uncharacteristically stern. He leaned forward, staring at me intently. I could see licks of flame from the kolebs'

fire dancing in his eyes. “We *will not succeed* if we try and get Charlie right now. You have to trust me in this.”

My eyes were burning. Frustration welled up inside me, making my skin feel too tight over my bones. “What if I just go in there and fucking shoot all the kolebs anyway,” I gritted out. “That will eliminate one of the problems, at least.”

“Do you really want to do that?” Edin asked bluntly. “What if the kolebs are the only thing stopping those behamots from hurting Charlie? We don’t know what they’re doing. Where they’re taking him, or why. And do you think you can somehow shoot them all without the behamots noticing?”

I didn’t want to hear him making sense. My insides were churning, and too much was buzzing in my brain, making me anxious and restless. I hadn’t slept enough for days, and I knew I was over-exhausted, even despite managing to grab a couple extra hours of sleep earlier. “I’m sick of just sitting here,” I told Edin. I knocked the bill of my hat up so I could scrub rough hands over my tired face, then pulled it back down low over my forehead.

“I know.” Edin’s voice was low and hushed. He leaned forward and rested a hand on my shoulder. “This is frustrating. Yes? And tiring. You are very tired.” He patted my shoulder, and I only just managed to suppress a shiver when his thumb smoothed over the bend of my neck, just above the neckline of my shirt. “They won’t be moving for a while. Let’s go back to the motel and get some more sleep. There will be a long day of walking after this, if their pattern stays the same.”

I automatically shook my head. “I’m okay. We need to—”

“Hunter.” Edin squeezed my shoulder. “You know you need to catch up on your sleep. You need to stay healthy if you want to get Charlie back.”

God, I *hated* when Edin spoke sense. Clenching my jaw, I nodded once, refusing to look at him. “Fine,” I growled.

He let out an amused little sound and squeezed my shoulder once more before rising to his feet. I followed him more slowly, stumbling on my prosthetic. My balance always got a little more messed up when I was tired.

I trudged after Edin back to the motel on the edge of the town, cursing my body for not being able to last just a bit longer. I envied Edin not needing food or water or sleep. It sounded amazing. The amount of shit I’d be able to get done if I didn’t have to fuckin’ sleep or go scavenging.

We separated into our respective rooms and I went through my routine on autopilot, brushing my teeth before stripping down and removing my prosthetic. When I lay back on the bed in the dark, over-exhaustion kept my burning eyes open and my mind churning. I hated not having eyes on Charlie. What if they'd gotten angry with him for something and started beating him? What if—

Exhaling hard, I forced my eyes shut and tried to think of something else. *Anything* else, just so I could get to sleep. Normally I could force myself into sleep and back out of it just as fast—years in the military did that—but not now. My stomach lurched when my mind drifted over to Edin. Specifically, to the way his fingers had felt on my abdomen earlier that afternoon.

When my cock twitched against my thigh, I shifted uncomfortably on the bed, trying to ignore it. *Stop thinking about that,* I ordered myself, but my brain betrayed me and forced the memory back front and centre. His big eyes had gleamed with something hot as he'd dragged them from my stomach up to my chest. His touch had been so light, but tension had pulsed heavy between us. Something that had been building up for a while now—that was becoming harder to ignore.

I scrunched my brow, clenching and unclenching my hands into fists against the bed as my brain went totally rogue and started imagining what could have happened if I hadn't stepped away. If I'd let Edin's fingers drift down, lower. Maybe he would have hooked them into my underwear and slowly dragged them down. Maybe he—

My eyes popped open, and I stared up at the dark ceiling, chest rising and falling a little faster. Heat thrummed through me. I lifted my head and peered down my body at the outline of my rock hard dick under my boxer briefs. I swallowed and dropped my head back with an exhale, staring up at the ceiling again.

Jerking off *would* help me sleep. Shit, I couldn't even remember the last time I'd done it. No wonder I was so tense. And it wouldn't be like I was jerking off because of… anything. It was just to help me get to sleep. That was all.

Feeling distinctly like I was doing something I shouldn't be, I reached down and lifted my hips to push my boxer briefs down. I got them over my stump and left them looped around my right knee, letting my thighs fall open wider.

When I skimmed my palm up the length of my cock, I shuddered. Jesus, I really *did* need this if I was reacting like that already. This wouldn't take long at all, and then I'd be able to sleep.

I grabbed my dick and started pumping, with no finesse or patience, just determination to get off and get off fast. I was already so hard it hurt, and the tip was wet with pre-cum. I slid my thumb through it, over the tiny slit of my cockhead, shuddering at the feel.

Edin's big, annoying face popped into my head and I huffed out a breath, but my hand didn't stop. In fact, it sped up as I pictured him standing over me, watching me, his fang digging in as he bit his lower lip. I imagined his rumbling voice encouraging me, telling me to go faster. So I did.

"Mmph." The pleasured grunt left me before I could stop it, my balls drawing up tight to hug the base of my dick. The slick sound of my hand flying over my cock filled the quiet of the room, alongside my panting breaths. Legs shifting restlessly over the sheets, I reached down with my free hand and cupped my balls. They were already tight and hard, and I squeezed gently, shuddering as pleasure throbbed through them and up the length of my shaft.

Fuck, I was going to come. My chest was heaving, and my thighs twitched as I shortened my fist's strokes, concentrating on the slick head. As the orgasm started churning in my balls, making my dick hard as steel, I couldn't stop the flood of thoughts. Edin's leather and wood scent. His handsome, craggy, inhuman face. The heat coming from his big body. The way the muscles in his back looked, shifting as he walked. I imagined it was his hands on me, touching me, and that was all it took.

I didn't know if I made a sound as I came, because white noise rushed through my ears as my entire body strained. Cum pumped out of my cock in hard spurts, painting my chest, making my legs twitch. When the tension finally drained out of me, I collapsed back onto the bed with a guttural groan, letting my hands fall away from my over-sensitive junk.

My eyelids were already drooping. It had worked. Sleep was closing in fast, finally, but I had enough sense to reach down and grab the bottom corner of the sheet to clean myself up, saying a silent apology to anyone who might happen to use this room, and this bed, after me. I dropped the sheet and was asleep the moment my head hit the pillow.

I would never admit it, even on pain of death, but I was grateful Edin forced me to get extra sleep. The koleb group walked for another entire day and night again, and we trailed behind them uselessly, keeping an eye on Charlie when we were close enough to have them in our sights.

We'd left Iowa and were somewhere south of Sioux Falls in South Dakota. A small part of me wanted to cry at the fact that I'd just walked a huge loop—we weren't all that far from the Nebraska base. For a second, I wondered if they were taking him there for some reason. But they were still heading north, so that couldn't be where they were going.

We still had no idea what the kolebs and behamots were heading towards. Where they were taking Charlie. Why they were taking such good care of him, if their goal wasn't to sacrifice him to their god.

The sun was sinking in the sky when Edin stopped suddenly, reaching over and smacking his hand into my chest to make me halt. My breath wheezed out of me at the impact, and I tried to mask it by coughing. "What's up?" I asked, voice strained, as I reached up and rubbed at my chest.

"Wyn."

I tensed up, reaching for my shotgun as my eyes darted around us. The Soul Eater? "Where?"

Edin shook his head, lips quirking into a little smile. "No, he's nearby, but not *that* nearby."

"Huh?" I shot him an odd look as I reluctantly re-holstered the shotgun on my back.

As we started walking again, Edin waved a dismissive hand like it should be obvious. "I can sense when he's near."

"What do you mean, you can *sense* him?" I asked, tone incredulous. "Are you going to tell me this is some monster psychic bullshit you all possess?"

"Well, I guess it must be seeing as you humans don't have it," Edin replied in a sardonic, patronising tone that made me grit my teeth. *Insolent fucker.*

"Whatever," I muttered, and Edin burst out into booming laughter, reaching over to shove my shoulder, sending me stumbling. "Why is that relevant anyway?" I asked as I righted myself, resisting the urge to shove him back, knowing it would be like slamming my palm into a brick wall.

“Wyn can help us.”

I stopped. “Help us?” I repeated. “Wait—you mean help us get *Charlie*?”

Edin stopped too, turning to face me. “Yes,” he said slowly, like I was an idiot.

“You seriously want me to go to a *mass murderer* to ask for help getting my friend back.”

Edin rolled his eyes. “I already told you, he is not just murdering humans. He’s destroying the parasites.” He raised an imperious brow at me. “The parasites that would wipe out *your species* if left unchecked.”

I wanted to snort. “Yeah, okay,” I said, my tone making it painfully clear that I still thought it was utter bullshit. “And why exactly would the *Soul Eater* help us get Charlie back?”

Edin started walking again, shrugging one big shoulder. “He is my oldest friend. If I ask him, he will help.”

I eyed his back as I trailed after him, wondering if he was delusional. “So he’s not just going to murder me on sight if we go see him?”

Edin snorted. “Not unless there’s a parasite living in your belly and I’ve somehow missed the signs.”

I made a face at his back before I caught up with him. “There isn’t,” I said shortly. “Thanks for that mental picture, though.”

“Do you want me to tell you what happens when a human gets infected?” he asked, voice eager. “Or I can tell you about the nest we found recently—”

“I’m good, scratch.” I quirked a brow at him. “So… the Soul Eater?” I was wary, but… “He’ll help us?”

Maybe with his help, we’d be able to take out the behamots. Guilt flooded through me like acid at the thought of accepting a mass murderer’s help. But… I would do it to save Charlie. Maybe it made me a piece of shit, but right then, I didn’t care.

Edin nodded. “He’s close, and it’s worth asking.” He jerked his chin in the direction of the koleb group, though they were too far ahead for me to see. “They’ll be setting up camp again soon. Once they do, we’ll go to Wyn.”

I exhaled, dread settling in my gut at the thought of being face-to-face with the Soul Eater. I had to try, though. For Charlie. I couldn’t ignore the feeling that had begun prickling the back of my neck over the last couple of

days—the one telling me that wherever the kolebs were taking him, they were getting close.

We were running out of time to get him back.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

It was nearing dawn when Edin finally directed us into an apartment building in a small town somewhere in South Dakota. My leg was throbbing. I was exhausted, tired down to my bones, but I didn't want to sleep yet. If we were finally here—if we'd finally reached the Soul Eater—I wanted to speak to him straight away. To see if he'd help us. I pulled off my mask and stuffed it in my bag, relieved to be able to breathe a little easier.

It was surreal to walk through the lobby and know that the Soul Eater was lurking somewhere in this building. I just prayed Edin was as good of a friend as he'd made out. That the Soul Eater wouldn't murder me on sight. I knew what Edin had said about the whole parasite thing, but I still didn't believe it.

The lobby seemed to split into apartment-lined corridors in two directions, and Edin directed us to the right. As we pushed through the doors and made our way down the quiet, dimly lit corridor, I slowly realised that I could hear a deep, masculine voice with a twang singing a… country song? It was so out of place that it made my brain blank momentarily with confusion.

"I uh… I'm guessing that's not your buddy Wyn," I said slowly to Edin. He grinned at me in response, flashing his big pearly fangs, and stopped outside the last door in the hallway.

Pushing it open, he gestured for me to head inside. My training kicked in the moment I stepped over the threshold, eyes darting and taking in the entire room. It was a standard open-plan apartment, worn and outdated. A small breakfast bar separated the main living area from the kitchen, which was where the singing was coming from.

There was a guy standing with his back to us at the cracked, peeling worktop, dressed head to toe in snug black clothing, fixing himself a plate of something and belting a country song out at the top of his lungs. I couldn't see his face, just the back of his dark head. He was singing so loud he hadn't even heard us come in.

Movement to my left caught my attention, eyes snapping that way as a tall figure appeared from a doorway. Wearing a grey coat with the hood up over all black clothes, I couldn't see his face—but I definitely noticed the

jagged horns protruding from his hood. Those things were weapons in their own right, even if the right was quite a bit longer than the left.

I noticed the long white fingers with their blackened tips, adorned in rings that looked like they were made from bone. My stomach twisted at the casual predatory grace with which he moved, as he leaned his shoulder on the door jamb, crossing his arms and looking totally at ease.

Wyn of the Wild Hunt. Wyn the Soul Eater.

My fingers twitched with their desire to grab my gun. This monster was the literal stuff of nightmares. Top of the US military's hit list. Public enemy number one.

And I was coming to him for help.

"You'll have to excuse Danny," he drawled, and my entire body broke out in goosebumps. That voice.

That voice was inhuman. *Wrong*. Like the whispering of a demon in the dead of night making your scalp prickle. Instinctive fear and adrenaline flooded my system, my body *knowing* it should get away from this creature. My fight or flight kicked in, and only Edin's heavy hand on my shoulder stopped me from humiliating myself and fleeing the room.

His words had made the singing guy stop and turn around. At the sight of us he grinned, before taking a big bite of what looked like peanut butter sandwiched between crackers as he crossed the room.

"Edin, my man." I moved awkwardly out of the way as Edin stepped forward and literally picked the guy up, squeezing him too hard until he let out a strangled laugh. "Easy, big guy."

Edin set him down with a grin. "It's good to see you, Danny."

Danny's face broke out into a big, beaming grin. "You too. Wyn said he could sense you comin' but I didn't realise you'd get here so soon." He took another huge bite of his weird cracker sandwich and nodded at me. "Hey. Danny."

I blinked, and it took me a second to realise he'd actually been speaking to me. "Hunter," I said shortly in response. I could hear a Southern drawl to his words, though different to Charlie's, and absently wondered which city he was from.

Oh, and what the fuck he was doing here. With the Soul Eater.

I watched as Danny wandered over to where Wyn was still leaning. When he reached him, the monster snagged his waist and dragged him closer. As Danny settled his back comfortably against Wyn's front, the Soul

Eater’s hooded head dipped to Danny’s neck for what I could only assume was a kiss.

I was pretty sure my eyes bulged out of my head.

I wasn’t prejudiced, but I’d never seen a human and monster be… romantic. I didn’t think it was possible. Well, at least I hadn’t before. Before meeting Edin. But he definitely made me feel and think things I shouldn’t.

It was almost comforting to know that other humans were attracted to monsters, too. And, I mean, fuck… Edin was just like a big, overgrown, jacked up purple dude. Wyn was… *inhuman.* Everything about him screamed demon. Ghoul. A creature that lurked in the shadows and the dead of night.

By comparison, Edin was just a big lovable teddy bear.

With fangs.

And horns.

And a long prehensile tail with a very sharp tip.

He spoke, snapping me out of my musings and making me tense up with his deep, booming voice. “How are you, Danny?” A flash of white fangs as he grinned. “My favourite human.”

I couldn’t help but feel somewhat offended, and I knew it showed on my face because Danny glanced at me and grinned crookedly. It was then that I really took in how handsome he was. Like model gorgeous, especially coupled with that body. Short dark hair, blue eyes and golden skin. High cheekbones, a square jaw and a nose that looked like it might have been broken once, but that only added to his appeal. Insecurity tightened my chest and I wished I hadn’t taken off my mask so at least my mouth and some of my scar was covered.

Before Danny could say anything, the Soul Eater tightened his grip and spoke. “You have your own now, boor. Stop flirting with him or I will have to rip out your throat.”

Edin and Danny both laughed. I could feel dark amusement creeping from Wyn like oily smoke.

What. The. Fuck.

They were all insane.

“Hey, you hungry?” I started when I realised Danny was speaking to me again. He jerked his head towards the kitchen and disentangled himself from Wyn, who seemed unwilling to let him go. “Or thirsty,” he added as I

warily followed him. “These guys can sometimes forget that us humans actually need food and water to survive.”

“I remembered,” Edin protested from behind me.

Danny finished his sandwich, before licking his fingers and wiping them on his pants. Then he bent down to open the little fridge under the counter. “Water? Soda? Beer?”

“You have all three?” I couldn’t stop myself from stepping forward to peer down. “You’ve seriously got beer?”

Danny flashed me a grin as he straightened back up with two longnecks. “Bet you need it, huh?”

“Man, you got no idea.” I felt my mouth pull into something resembling a rueful smile as I shook my head, reaching up to scrub at my hair.

Danny huffed a brief laugh, passing me a bottle. It was the cheap, generic brand they sold in the cities. “Probably do, but doubt we’ve got time to swap stories right now. Maybe later.”

“Yes, I’d like to find out why you’ve come.” My stomach somersaulted when Wyn’s distorted voice came so close behind me. I turned as casually as I could so that my back was to the wall, warily watching the Soul Eater as he walked to stand next to Danny.

“Thank you for waiting here for us.” Edin came and stood beside me, not close enough that we were touching. I ignored the desire to shuffle to my left so my shoulder pressed against his arm.

“No problem.” Danny gracefully hopped up to sit on the countertop, arms resting on his spread thighs. He took a swig of beer, dangling the bottle between two long fingers, and watched us expectantly.

I glanced over at Edin, expecting him to take the lead. When he just looked back at me, nodding his head to indicate I should speak, I exhaled. “My friend has been taken by uh… kolebs.”

Danny looked at Wyn questioningly. The Soul Eater placed a greyish white hand with black fingertips on his thigh and rubbed, the gesture familiar and affectionate. “They’re small, irritating creatures that live underground. They like to dig tunnels.” He sounded mildly disgusted, like they were beneath him. Then he cocked his head, and I could feel his eyes on me from beneath that hood. “They don’t usually eat meat, though.”

I cleared my dry throat. “Edin said something about a, uh, pilgrimage.” I swallowed. “And sacrifices.”

Wyn’s hood jerked once in a nod. “Yes.”

There was a moment of silence. “So I need to save him.”

Wyn crossed his arms. “And why are you telling me this?”

“Wyn,” Danny admonished, reaching out with his foot to hook it round Wyn’s hip. The Soul Eater let himself be tugged sideways until he was standing between Danny’s spread legs. Danny slung his arms over Wyn’s shoulders from behind. “How can we help?” he asked me.

I stared at their embrace for a distracted moment, feeling strange heat bloom through me. I jolted out of it and cleared my throat again. “We’ve been on their tail for a while, but Edin says they’ve stopped heading towards the… tear. Between the worlds.” It still sounded ridiculous to me. “So that would suggest that…”

“That they didn’t take him to be a sacrifice,” Wyn finished, one of his pale hands reaching up and clasping Danny’s wrist, thumb rubbing in absent circles.

I nodded. “And Edin said you…” It was beyond surreal to be directly addressing the fucking *Soul Eater*. Like we were goddamn pals or something. “You might be able to help.”

“They’ve stopped and set up a camp not far from here,” Edin added. “And then I sensed you close by, Wyn.”

“If they’ve stopped, why don’t you just walk into their camp and get your friend back?” Wyn said bluntly.

I flushed defensively, opening my mouth to speak—to tell him that was exactly what I *wanted* to do—but Edin beat me to it. “They’ve got some behamots with them. Almost acting as bodyguards. It’s strange.”

Wyn made a noise. “I can help you with behamots.”

Edin chuckled. “Remember that time we—”

“So Edin and Wyn can go and get your friend from the camp?” Danny interrupted, and I shot him a brief, grateful look under the brim of my cap. He nodded at me once in understanding, as though he was fully aware of Edin’s tendency to drift away from the conversation at hand.

“They have a *lot* of behamots,” Edin clarified.

“How many?” Wyn asked, leaning back into Danny, as if he barely even cared about the conversation. Even though I supposed he didn’t—it wasn’t like he knew me, or Charlie, so had no reason to care—it still made a wave of anger rise up inside of me.

“I counted at least six,” Edin told Wyn.

There was a pause. “Six might be… difficult,” Wyn said at length, his inhuman voice grating like he hated to admit it. His hood turned, and I sensed eyes on me again. “This person is important to you? Are they—what, family? Your lover?”

My face flushed hot, and for some reason it felt vitally important to clarify immediately. “*No*. Not my—Charlie’s not my lover.” I refused to look at Edin, no matter how hard my eyeballs strained with the desire to. “He’s my best friend. What does that matter anyway?”

Wyn shrugged one shoulder. “It doesn’t, I suppose. Just wondered how much you cared about them. If it would be worth it.”

I gritted my teeth. “I care enough to do whatever it takes to get him back. So yes, it’s fucking worth it.”

I knew I’d potentially overstepped when Wyn stared at me in silence for a long moment, his hooded head deathly still. Thankfully, Danny broke the icy tension. “So how do we get him back? Charlie, you said?” I nodded. “Okay, so let’s work out a plan to get Charlie back from the… those things.”

I admired Danny’s optimism, but from the stillness in both Edin and the Soul Eater, I wasn’t sure how easy it would be. I remembered the behamot from the tunnels. It had been huge, and Edin had struggled fighting just one. I could understand why Edin and Wyn were reluctant to take on at least six of them.

“It will be… a challenge, if there are so many behamots,” Wyn finally said. I felt his gaze lock back on me. “I don’t know you, human. And I don’t know your friend.” His hood turned, towards Edin. “If this human is important to you, Edin—”

“Hunter is,” Edin said. “So that means Charlie is.”

Warmth bloomed within me, and I had to force my face to remain impassive so I wouldn’t gaze at Edin like some soppy fool. I wasn’t sure how well I did concealing the rush of affection for the big purple monster that spread through me, because I noticed Danny watching me with a tiny smile.

I cleared my throat and reached up to tug the bill of my cap lower.

“Fine then.” Wyn’s voice was blunt. “We’ll go get him.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It took a few moments for it to really sink in. That the Soul Eater was going to help us get Charlie back.

Edin really must be important to Wyn, for the Soul Eater to agree to this just because he had asked him to. Edin *had* mentioned they were old friends. It was weird thinking of the Soul Eater having a friend. Having something so… normal. So human.

But then again, he also apparently had a human lover, so there was that.

"Thank you," I remembered to say after a couple of beats of silence. "I… I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

"I'll do it for Edin, human. Not for you." Danny gave him a little shove, and Wyn let out an exasperated noise. "And for Danny, because he wants me to help you."

Danny made a frustrated sound. "That's not what I—never mind." He rolled his eyes at me, and I wanted to smile. Relief coursed through me. The Soul Eater was going to help us get Charlie from the koleb camp.

Before I could stop myself, I turned and grinned at Edin for just a second, overwhelmed with gratitude towards the big purple monster. I wouldn't have gotten this far without him. Hell, I wouldn't have gotten out of that fucking sinkhole in Kentucky without him. I owed him so much.

Edin stared at me, looking mildly shocked. At first I couldn't think why, then I realised—I was smiling. Had I ever smiled at him before? God, I really was a surly asshole. Why had he even put up with me for this long?

"Tell me what you know already, then, Edin." Wyn's unearthly voice broke the moment, and I looked away as Edin's big eyes slid over to the Soul Eater. I took my first sip of the beer Danny had given me and nearly groaned out loud. It tasted even better than I'd anticipated, because tentative relief was sparking to life in my gut. We were going to get Charlie back. We *had* to. There was no way we wouldn't manage it with Edin *and* the Soul Eater.

The two of them started discussing the kolebs and the layout of the camp. Danny listened avidly and interjected with questions every now and then, and I filled in some additional points Edin missed out. I learned that Wyn could turn to smoke—what the fuck?

“If you can turn to smoke, can’t you just go in there and carry Charlie out?” I blurted before thinking better of it.

Wyn huffed as if the question offended him. “It isn’t just that simple, *human*.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Theoretically, yes. But behamots are one of the few creatures that can counter my ability to dissipate. If one of them gets hold of me, I can’t do it.”

“It’s why I had to help him all those years ago,” Edin interjected, grinning wolfishly. “A behamot was sitting on him, taunting him while another grabbed a giant boulder to drop on his head and pop it like a grape.”

“Thank you, Edin,” Wyn gritted out, clearly speaking between clenched teeth. I saw Danny hide a smile.

“So we need to come up with a way to distract all of them,” I shot a pointed look at Edin, remembering our conversation from a few days ago, “so that Wyn can grab Charlie. Right?”

It sounded impossible. We’d witnessed how unwilling the behamots were to leave Charlie alone, not even letting him go to the bathroom in peace. Wyn and Edin seemed unconcerned about the kolebs, so they must not have been enough of a threat to the two monsters, despite the fact they’d managed to take down a fully grown, adult soldier. A human, though. That was the difference.

And it was also the reason Wyn said I couldn’t go with them, no matter how much I protested.

“That is bullshit,” I gritted out, shooting an expectant look at Edin to back me up. “Of course I’m fucking going.”

Edin hesitated, which made me clench my hands into fists. “It will be very dangerous, Hunter,” he eventually said, in a voice I knew was meant to placate me. “And if you are there, I will only worry about you—”

“I’ll be fine,” I interrupted. “I can handle myself. I’ve been fighting monsters for years.”

“Not behamots, though.”

I gritted my teeth again. “No, not behamots,” I admitted reluctantly. “But plenty of other hard-to-kill monsters. I can help.”

“You won’t be a help.” Wyn’s voice was flat. “You’ll get in the way. You will distract Edin. You’re not coming.”

My blood pressure rose. “Listen—”

“Hunter.” Edin’s big hand gripped the back of my neck, squeezing gently. “Please. Stay here with Danny.”

I groaned internally, feeling my resolve weaken. It was that fucking *please*. In that deep, rumbly voice that curled through my belly, so familiar and comforting to me now. Edin had done so much for me. Helped me. If he really would have preferred me to stay behind, maybe I had to stop being such a combative bastard for a second and do something for *him*.

"Are you sure?" I said at length, the reluctance clear in my voice. "You're sure I wouldn't be able to—"

"I'm sure." Edin's thumb stroked the pulse point at the side of my neck, making a spark of pleasure shoot through me, loosening some of the tension keeping my neck and shoulders tight. Honestly, it felt like they'd been impossibly tight for weeks at this point.

I exhaled. After a long pause, I said, "Okay. I'll stay here."

Edin rumbled out a low, pleased sound, squeezing my neck again before letting go. "Thank you."

I clenched my jaw to stop the arguments that wanted to spew out as I listened to Edin and Wyn discuss a plan. Eventually, though, the long day of travelling to get here finally started to catch up with me, and I could feel my eyelids drooping as I drained the last of my beer. I wasn't sure how Edin noticed, but a second later I felt a big hand gripping the back of my neck.

"Let's carry on making a plan later and we can put it into action tonight," Edin said.

I saw Wyn nod, long fingers absently running up and down Danny's thigh, where he was still lounging between them. "Yes. It will need to be dark, and it's already getting light so there's nothing we can do for the time being."

He was right, but worry still clenched at me. What if the kolebs set off again? It would be easier to grab Charlie while they were resting.

Edin must have sensed me tensing up, because he squeezed my neck. "They won't move yet," he said. "We know their pattern now. They'll stay put for the day."

I exhaled, nodding. Edin was right. And I was fading fast here. I needed to sleep so I'd have a clear head.

I thanked Danny for the beer, setting the bottle on the counter and following Edin to the front door. Danny came to the door to see us off, Wyn sidling up behind him.

"You can take any of the other apartments," Danny said. "They're all empty."

“Pick one on the other side of the building, though,” Wyn remarked. I realised why when he tugged Danny back against his chest and slid his long arms around his middle.

Danny cleared his throat, cheeks going pink. “There, um… I’m guessing you’ve got some food. But I’ve got some cans of stuff in here, if you need anything. Soup, meatballs, shit like that.”

I nodded, readjusting my pack on my shoulders and glancing down the hallway. “I’m good. Thanks.”

“What’s wrong with this one right here?” Edin’s tone was sly, like he found himself hilarious, as he gestured at the door next door. “That way we can come right over if—”

“Take one on the other side of the building, Edin,” Wyn repeated in a threatening tone.

Edin snorted with laughter, and Danny’s face went even pinker. “I—um, if you really want to stay in that one…”

“They’re not staying in that one,” Wyn interrupted bluntly.

I stiffened. “We’re not actually staying in the *same*—”

“Look how pink Danny’s gone,” Edin snickered.

I reached over and punched him on the arm. “Cut it out.”

I got major eye-roll vibes from Wyn, even though I couldn’t see his face. “I don’t want to hear you and your human, Edin.”

“Wyn,” Danny admonished, knocking his shoulder back into the Soul Eater.

“You agree with me, Danny,” Wyn said. “You said it meant we wouldn’t have to be quiet when we fucked—”

“Jesus, Wyn!” Danny’s hand vanished into the darkness of Wyn’s hood, no doubt to smack it over the monster’s mouth. His face went red. “Kind of an overshare.”

Wyn’s long fingers wrapped around his wrist and easily prised his hand away. “Overshare? I’m sure Edin’s seen us fucking—”

“*What?!*”

“—and I don’t care what his human thinks—”

“Okay, that’s enough.” Danny shot me an apologetic smile and started dragging Wyn back into their room. “Sorry. Um… okay, night guys. Sorry. Night.”

I was pretty sure I heard Wyn snicker just before the door clicked shut. Edin and I stood there for a few moments in the sudden musty quiet,

watching dust motes float lazily in the sickly artificial light. I cleared my throat and began walking down the hall. My boots were near silent on the threadbare carpet.

Edin fell into step beside me silently. When we were halfway down the corridor, I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. “Have you really seen them fucking?”

Edin shot me a look, a crooked grin curving his full lips and showing a peek of fang. “No. Wyn was just teasing. I have heard them, though. Danny is very vocal.” His tone was conversational, but he snickered when I spluttered in disbelief.

“Christ, do monsters have any boundaries?” I shook my head.

“I imagine it’s more to do with age than species.” Edin shoved open the door to the front lobby and gestured for me to go through. “Wyn and I are thousands of years old. You tend the lose the majority of your inhibitions after the first hundred years or so.”

I shook my head again. “Perv,” I muttered under my breath, but it came out more affectionate than I’d anticipated.

“Also, I have extremely good hearing.” Edin’s tone was carefully light, but… loaded. My entire body tensed up. “Much, much better than most other beings.”

Oh.

Oh shit.

That definitely meant he’d heard me jerk off the other night, right?

My cheeks heating, I risked a glance up at Edin. He met my eyes briefly, and I *knew.*

Fuck. Edin had heard me jerk off. And I’d been jerking off over *him.*

Horrified, I spooled my mind back, trying to remember if I’d uttered his name at any point in my freaky monster fantasy. I couldn’t remember doing it, but who the fuck knew? Oh god. This was so embarrassing.

I was still getting hard from the thought of it, though. The thought of Edin laying in bed in the next room, staring up at the dark ceiling and listening to me stroke myself off. Or maybe he joined in—maybe he made himself come listening to me. Fuck…

My legs going weak, I forced myself to keep walking towards the door that led to the other set of apartments. We picked two at random, and I muttered a vague “See you in a few hours,” at Edin before disappearing into mine. It was smaller than Danny and Wyn’s, just a single living space with

the bed against one wall and a tiny kitchen lining the opposite. That suited me fine. Exhaling hard, I set down my bag and the shotgun, then crossed into the bathroom.

I flicked on the light and took a leak. As I washed my hands, I watched myself absently in the mirror, eyes tracing automatically over my scar. I'd been good-looking before, but now all I could see was that fucking scar. That little snarl on the left side of my top lip, making me look rabid or like some villain from an old movie. I tried hard to ignore it as I stared at my reflection; tried to look at my other features objectively.

I knew I had a good jawline, and my mouth had been okay before it'd gotten ruined. I had an aquiline nose; not particularly big, but it had that little bump that made some people think I'd broken it before, even though I'd somehow made it this far without doing so. My eyes were light brown, although I'd once hooked up with someone who said they looked "*like amber*" in the sunlight. I remembered snorting at that in disbelief, brushing off the poetic meaningless crap.

My hair was short and a plain light brown. Pretty boring. Overall, my face had been fine before I'd gotten the scar—I'd never had any problems getting someone into bed if I wanted to. Now, though… Now, all I saw was that distorted snarl of a top lip. That thick, indented jagged line that narrowly missed the corner of my eye and warped the skin over my cheekbone, pulling it a little too tight in places.

I stared at myself a moment longer, but my eyes glazed over as I remembered Edin grinning at Danny's handsome face. Calling him his *favourite human*. When my stomach twisted, I jerked back from the sink and scrubbed rough wet hands over my face.

What was wrong with me? This was pathetic. Edin and I were just… current acquaintances working together to achieve a goal. That was it. I couldn't stand around getting all twisted up because he'd complimented another person in front of me. That wasn't what I was here for.

Why did I even care? Why was I even standing here, assessing the way I looked in the fucking mirror? It didn't matter what I looked like. What mattered was getting Charlie back, then going back to our somewhat mundane lives in the military, carrying out the same duties, eating the same shit, following the same routines. Edin wouldn't be around for any of that, so why did I even care if Danny was his *favourite* human, and not me, even after everything?

I turned away from the sink to start the shower, and made a point of not looking at myself again.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“So what apartment did you pick?” Danny asked me later that morning. We’d returned to their apartment after a few hours of sleep, and Danny was currently making us his weird peanut butter cracker sandwiches. Guy had a thing for peanut butter, apparently.

I accepted it gratefully, though. “I’m in 207,” I told him through a mouthful. “Edin’s in 208.”

Danny glanced over at me, licking peanut butter off his thumb. “Not sharing?”

I felt my cheeks flush as I swallowed my mouthful. “No.”

Danny’s head turned back to the counter as he screwed the lid back on the peanut butter jar. I recognised it as the shitty brand they sold in the coastal cities and wondered how he’d managed to get hold of some. “Fair enough. I bet Edin’s a nightmare to room with, anyway. Probably like a hyperactive kid.”

My mouth twitched. “Yeah.”

Edin and Wyn were across the room talking about their plan as we ate. I was desperate to go over and listen, but decided to leave them to it. Danny and I wouldn’t be going with them when they went to get Charlie, anyway. I’d argued with Edin about it again, but he’d convinced me it would be far easier if it was just the two of them. They’d known each other so long, and had done things like this together before, that having either of us there would only make things more difficult.

I didn’t like it, but I understood. If one or both of us were there, we’d be a liability. I was human, and as much as I might dislike the fact, that meant I was far, far more vulnerable than Edin or Wyn.

“So how long have you been here?” I asked Danny to distract myself from my racing thoughts.

He leaned back against the counter opposite me and took a bite of his own sandwich. “Just a couple days. We don’t stay in one place too long.”

“Thanks for waiting here for us. And for your help,” I told him, finishing my sandwich and setting down my plate. “And, uh, the sandwich.”

Danny waved a hand. “Don’t mention it.”

His voice was muffled round a mouthful of food. He ate his sandwich as fast as I did, and as he was putting our plates in the sink, Wyn's creepy voice carried across the room. "Danny." I turned at the same time Danny did. My brow wrinkled with confusion when the Soul Eater held up a… baseball. "I found some last night," he said, absently tossing the ball between his black-fingered hands.

I glanced at Danny in time to see a wide grin break out over his face. "Awesome." He rounded the breakfast bar that separated the little kitchen from the rest of the room. "Want to go now?"

Wyn nodded. Edin loped over to me as I watched Danny grab a dinged up metal baseball bat from beside the couch. The pair of them headed for the front door.

"You coming?" Danny asked. "We're gonna go practise on the roof."

"Practise what?" I asked in an incredulous voice before I could stop myself. "Baseball?"

"Got to keep my aim good." Danny grinned at me, resting the baseball bat over his shoulder.

I opened my mouth to protest, to say Wyn and Edin needed to be coming up with their plan to get Charlie, not playing fucking baseball on the roof. We didn't have *time* for this shit. But Edin clamped a hand on my shoulder before I could speak.

"We've worked out what we're going to do," he said. "We'll set out just before it gets dark. Nothing more for us to do now but wait."

I closed my mouth again, clamping my lips shut tight. At length, I nodded. Fine. Fuck it. If I had to sit around for the next few hours waiting, might as well waste the time watching the Soul Eater and his human boyfriend play goddamn baseball on the roof of an abandoned apartment building. Why the fuck not, right?

We followed them out of the apartment and up a rusty metal staircase to the roof. I was hit by the strong wind the moment I stepped outside. It was cold up here, and for a few moments my balance felt a little off as I walked cautiously to the edge of the building and looked down. We weren't overly high up—enough for me to croak if I fell, but not enough for vertigo to kick in properly.

When I turned back, Wyn and Danny were already in position, with Wyn at the far end of the roof and Danny standing closer to me and Edin. We

made sure we were far enough back to not be in the firing line. I had no idea if the Soul Eater was a decent pitcher or not.

Danny cupped a hand around his mouth. “Hey, batter, batter, saaa-*wing*,” he called.

I snorted. “Uh… you’re the batter, right? So I don’t think—”

“I dunno, man, I’ve never seen a baseball game.” He got into position, making a big show of leaning forward with the bat cocked over his shoulder, moving his hips back and forth. “Throw the ball, Soul Eater,” he called.

“No wager this time?” Wyn asked, his unearthly voice carrying across the roof and making shivers race down my spine.

“Okay, um…” Danny straightened up, resting the metal bat on his shoulder as he shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand and looked around. Then he pointed past Wyn towards the building behind him. “If I can get it to the next roof over, I win. And I get a back massage. For *at least* a half hour before you try it on.”

My face flushed hot at his words. I tried not to picture that scenario.

Danny jerked a thumb over his shoulder and continued calling over to Wyn, who was waiting on the opposite side of the roof. “If you get the ball past me onto *that* roof, *you* win.”

“And what will I get if I win?” Wyn called.

Danny made an impatient noise, getting back into position. “Come on, you know I’m a sure thing anyway, baby,” he yelled back. “Just throw the damn ball.”

Edin chuckled beside me. When Wyn threw the ball with inhuman strength and speed, I thought there was no way Danny would be able to hit it. Shit, I could barely *see* it.

But they must have done this a lot, because a split-second later Danny swung that bat round and a loud, satisfying *crack* echoed over the rooftops.

“It made it to the next roof,” Edin called out a few seconds later, turning to shoot Danny an affectionate grin, which made my stomach tighten.

Danny grinned in triumph, setting the heavy bat on his shoulder and sauntering towards Wyn. The Soul Eater met him halfway, pulling him close and running blackened fingers up Danny’s spine. “Alright, you get your massage. I promise I’ll keep my hands to myself otherwise.”

Danny wrapped his free arm around Wyn’s neck. “Shit, you know you’re still gonna get it, Soul Eater.” His face disappeared in the darkness

of Wyn's hood as they kissed.

It was like they'd forgotten we were even here. I still couldn't wrap my head around the Soul Eater being… *in love*. Being *nice* to someone. Having *emotions.*

I looked away from the little love fest, but my eyes snagged on Edin and I felt my cheeks flush. Before I could stop it, my mind started wondering what Edin would be like with a… partner. For some reason, I didn't think he'd be as sweet as Wyn was to Danny—and there was something I never, ever thought I'd be thinking about the Soul Eater.

No. Edin would be… intense. Not sweet. He'd be like a whirlwind. Or a battering ram. Taking down everything in his path. Taking what he wanted. He'd be overwhelming and almost too much and—

Fuck. I gulped, praying my half-hard cock wasn't visible through my pants, and tried to rip my eyes away before he could notice me staring. But he already had. Edin was watching me back, eyes intense with something unspoken between us. His face was uncharacteristically serious, no sign of that playful, wolfish grin or cocky smirk.

I swallowed, and saw his eyes drop to track the bob of my adam's apple in my throat.

In that moment, I realised that I couldn't keep trying to deny or ignore it. My attraction to him. Seeing Danny and the Soul Eater had caused that easily tempted part of my brain to take over. To whisper: *Look, it* is *possible! Look, someone else wants a monster too. That means you're allowed*.

And now, when I looked at Edin, it wasn't just an ember of attraction low in my gut that I could push away and ignore. Now, it was like that ember had flared and the heat was filling up every bit of me. Now, when I looked at him, I could feel my entire body reacting. I wanted him. I wanted to touch all that hot, smooth skin that was always on view, always fucking tempting me. I wanted to hear that impossibly deep voice groaning out with pleasure.

I wanted to fuck Edin.

And judging by the way he was looking back at me, he knew exactly what I was thinking. And he wanted it too.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Wyn had only found a set of three baseballs, but he kept turning to smoke to get across to the other roofs and collect them. Danny was a damn good batter, so they probably did this a lot. He asked if I wanted to have a go, but I shook my head. I absolutely did not want to stand across from the Soul Eater while he flung a hard object at me at inhuman speed.

Eventually we headed back down to Danny and Wyn's apartment. I was jittery with nerves, with the impatience to get Charlie, but it wasn't even noon yet. Fuck, we had *hours*.

I followed Danny to the kitchen and filled my canteen up with fresh water at the sink. I took a couple gulps, watching Danny absently as he opened a side door that led to a tiny utility area off the kitchen. He pulled open the dryer in there and reached in.

"Hey, want to wash your clothes while you're here? I found detergent." Danny nodded at the machine as he took a clean shirt out of it. Setting it on the top of the dryer, he reached down to pull off the one he was wearing, which was sweaty from playing ball in the sun on the roof. "The dryer still works here too. There's nothing quite like warm, clean clothes fresh from a dryer."

I chuckled and started to answer, but the words died on my throat when Danny's head emerged from the bottom of his old shirt and he reached for the clean one.

I stared at the word carved into his chest. Only one meaning for it came to mind. "You—you were military?" My voice was a faint rasp. Had they… had the military done that to him?

Danny froze for a second, staring at me in confusion, before realisation flared in his eyes and he glanced down at his chest. "Oh." He swallowed and quickly pulled on the clean shirt, covering his chest. His throat was splotchy. "I was—I mean—" He stopped and stared at me hard, brows pulled low. "Wait… are *you*?"

"Yeah," I rasped distractedly. I couldn't get the image of that word carved into Danny's chest out of my mind. *Deserter*. The 'D' had looked neat, the scar pink and shiny from a uniform burn. The rest was fainter and

jagged, and had clearly been carved by hand into his skin. Who the fuck had done that to him?

"*What?*" Pure rage made the Soul Eater's distorted voice tremble. It sent terror shooting up my spine, jerking me out of my thoughts. I spun quickly, instinct preventing me from keeping my back to him as he stalked towards me, blackened fingers curling into claws by his sides.

I stumbled back, hands coming up in a gesture of placation. "W-wait—"

"Wyn." Danny grabbed Wyn's arm, somehow making the monster stop. "I don't think—"

"What's going on?" Edin's booming voice made me jump. I was already twitchy, unable to take my eyes off of Wyn, whose entire posture betrayed his desire to rip me to shreds. My heart pounded in my chest, hairline prickling with sweat under my cap.

"Did you know?" Wyn snarled.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Edin come to a stop. "Know what?" he asked slowly. "Hunter, are you—"

"He's with the military." Wyn's distorted voice was even worse than normal, and I barely managed to suppress a shudder at the sound of it.

There was a long, agonised pause. "What?" Edin said. I couldn't look at him, couldn't tear my eyes from the predator in front of me, even as I sensed Edin turn towards me. "Is that true?"

What the fuck? My chest was heaving with panic, but I didn't know what to do—what would be the right thing to say. "Yes," I grated, trying not to flinch when Wyn's fingers twitched. "I didn't realise—I didn't know it fucking mattered!"

Wyn snarled. "You just saw why it matters, *human*. I will gut you—"

"No, Wyn." Danny's voice was frantic. "I've never seen Hunter before and he clearly doesn't recognise me either. He had nothing to do with—"

"You've been lying to Edin this whole time." Wyn's body got even tenser. "So I have *two* reasons to rip your spine out of your—"

Danny gritted out his name again at the same time that Edin growled, "*No*," and stalked towards me.

"I haven't lied to Edin!" I spluttered. "I haven't lied to anyone! I didn't know it fucking mattered that I'm in the military!" I finally managed to dart my gaze over to the big purple monster. "Come on, Edin." My tone was rough and pleading. "You know I haven't hidden anything intentionally. I

wasn’t trying to—I don’t even know what you’re all thinking! I just want to get my fucking friend back!”

Edin stepped closer to me. “He hasn’t lied to me, Wyn,” he said, his deep voice calm. “It didn’t come up. I promise. And if I’d known, we wouldn’t have come.”

Something sharp went through my chest at that. *We wouldn’t have come*. As if a part of him didn’t trust me now.

“I find that extremely hard to believe,” Wyn bit out icily.

Edin shook his head. “Hunter isn’t a big talker. Even if he was, we haven’t had much opportunity to *chat* while we were tracking the kolebs. We had to stay quiet in the tunnels.” He shot me a very faint smile, but I was too tense to do more than flick my eyes over to him for a split-second before returning them to the Soul Eater. “And he is a terrible liar.”

The Soul Eater let out a disgusted sound.

I spoke before he could, heart thudding hard. “I don’t know what—” I shook my head and looked at Danny, whose face was tense. He was still gripping Wyn’s arm tight. “Whatever they did to you, man, I’m sorry, but I swear I don’t—I would never—” I stopped and took a breath, trying to calm down so I could gather my thoughts and form a coherent sentence. “I was up in Minnesota on a job for months. Me and Charlie—we were cut off from everyone. So whatever happened—”

“You really didn’t hear about it?” Danny asked, brows furrowing. “About what happened at the Nebraska base?”

I shook my head, but curiosity sparked in my gut. “I’ve never been stationed there. We went to report in there after the mission, like we’d been told to, but it was gone,” I said, voice rough. “Totally gutted and deserted. We couldn’t get a hold of anyone, so we were heading to the Tennessee base when we—when the kolebs got Charlie.” I licked my dry lips, chancing a glance at Wyn. “What… what happened at the Nebraska base?”

“Wyn freed all the monsters held there,” Danny said, voice distracted. “Why aren’t you wearing tactical gear?”

“We were up in Minnesota a lot longer than we’d expected,” I told him, even as my mind tried to process what he’d just said. “In the end, it was find civilian clothing or stay in our rank combats for months.” I swallowed, looking directly at Danny. “I swear to god, man, I haven’t been trying to hide the fact I’m military. I just didn’t know it mattered.”

I saw Danny squeeze Wyn's arm as he looked over at him. "He's telling the truth, Wyn," he said. "C'mon, it's fine. Hunter's fine."

Wyn was still practically vibrating with tension and anger. I could feel the icy weight of his eyes on me from under that hood, and my scalp prickled. I forced myself to look back at him. To look into the impenetrable blackness of his hood. An absent part of my brain wondered what he looked like under there. Wondered if Danny had seen his face. Surely he had.

"I will be watching you, human," Wyn eventually said, his ghoulish voice so low and cold that it sent shivers up my spine.

I refused to show it though, clenching my jaw and holding my gaze. "Fine." I was relieved when my voice didn't tremble. At least we were roughly the same height, so he didn't loom over me. "Then you'll see I'm telling the truth. I just want to get Charlie back."

"We'll still help you. Obviously." Danny tugged on Wyn's arm, but it didn't move him an inch. He was like a statue, and I could feel him still staring at me from beneath his hood. My fight-or-flight started kicking back in, and my throat bobbed as I swallowed. I knew I should thank Danny, but I couldn't move. Couldn't speak. It was like my whole body was focusing too intently on the predator in front of me, waiting for the slightest movement.

"Wyn," Danny snapped, steel in his voice, and it finally made the Soul Eater move. He half-turned—I knew he was still watching me—and smoothed a hand down Danny's side. "Let's go cool off, huh?" Danny said and tugged his arm again, and this time Wyn let him lead him away. They went through a door, to what I assumed was a bedroom, and shut it behind them.

I exhaled a trembling breath and turned to Edin. I was dreading what I'd see on his face. Disappointment? Distrust? Loathing? Did he hate the military as much as Wyn did? If they were the ones who'd carved that word into Danny's chest, I could understand why. Honestly, the sight of it was still making my stomach queasy. How could anyone do that to another person?

Edin was watching me, face impassive. We stared at each other in silence for a moment, before the tension felt like the tendons in my neck would snap, and I had to break it by speaking. "Do you hate me now?" It blurted out of me before I could stop it. I resented how vulnerable the question made me feel.

Edin watched me silently for a moment longer, before shaking his head. “No. Of course not.”

“I didn’t hide it from you intentionally, Edin.” My voice was rough. “I swear.”

“I know you didn’t.” He shrugged one big shoulder. “And I didn’t ask. I just assumed you were a nomad or rogue raider. It didn’t cross my mind.”

A tiny trickle of relief eased some of the tension in my neck and shoulders. I swallowed hard. “I would never—” I gestured towards the door Wyn and Danny had vanished through. “I had no idea they would do something like that. I can’t believe…” I shook my head. “It’s so barbaric.”

“Yes,” Edin agreed, his deep voice solemn. “They hurt Danny very badly.”

His words made my gut clench. I’d only just met Danny, but he was… nice. He seemed like a sweet guy. Harmless. “Why?” I asked, voice rough.

“They thought he helped Wyn escape from the base. He didn’t, for the record. But that wasn’t what they were concerned about. They thought he could somehow control Wyn, because Wyn hadn’t killed him. They were interested in figuring out how he managed to control a monster, for their own gain.”

I swallowed. I’d kept myself as wilfully ignorant of the military’s specimen programme as I could, not wanting to get involved with it any more than I had to be. But Charlie and I had talked about it at length before, and we’d both surmised that the military’s interest in holding monsters was clearly rooted in how they could utilise them. Some monsters were unfathomably powerful. It made sense that the military would be interested in harnessing that power for themselves, even if it was immoral to do so.

“They hurt Wyn too,” Edin told me.

I nodded. “I’d heard they might have been torturing the monsters in that base,” I said, voice hoarse. It was one thing to hear a rumour of it. Another to witness the horror of it, of what the military had done, and the aftermath. It was making me feel sick.

“Yes. They did.” His voice was oddly tight. “But they also shot him in the face.”

Edin’s abrupt words made me jerk with shock. I stared at him. “What?”

“After Wyn escaped, and took Danny with him, they found them and blew half his head off,” Edin said, big eyes watching me carefully. “They

thought they'd killed him." A tiny smile curled one corner of his mouth. "They hadn't."

"Jesus Christ." My mind flashed back to that night where the raiders had cornered us, pointing a shotgun at us. I remembered Edin's words. "So that's what you meant. With those raiders. When you said some things could survive a bullet to the head."

"Yes." Edin's smile grew a tiny bit. "Wyn is a tough old bastard. So is Danny. They tortured him until Wyn had healed enough to get him out."

"Fuck." I swallowed back the bile rising in my throat. "Wh-where? Out of where? Where did they take him?"

Edin shrugged one big shoulder a little. "Somewhere in Utah."

The Utah base. I'd been there before. It wasn't on the scale of the Nebraska base, but I knew it was a big building that went deep underground. I'd only been in the top few floors. The thought that they could have been torturing people right beneath my feet… "Fuck," I croaked again, mind reeling.

I mean, I wasn't naïve. I knew the military did unsavoury things. It always had, and always would. But again… witnessing it was very, very different to having a vague idea of it in the back of my mind that I could ignore as I went about my everyday duties.

I jumped when Edin squeezed my shoulder. "Are you alright, Hunter?"

I nodded automatically, but I felt dazed. My head was too full. "I just… I don't know, scratch."

I wasn't even sure what I meant, but Edin nodded. "Let's go back to your room," he said. "Wyn needs to calm down, anyway. And you should rest before tonight."

A fresh wave of worry flooded me. "Is Wyn not going to help get Charlie anymore?" I asked, as Edin guided me towards the door.

He shook his head. "He'll help. Danny will talk to him."

I let him lead me out of the apartment and down the quiet corridor to the lobby. By the time we got back to my room, I was vibrating with tension. My head felt like it was going to explode. The constant worry about Charlie had already been like a vise around my skull, squeezing it tight. But now I also had what I'd learned about Danny and the military spinning through my mind.

It was all too much. I didn't want to think about any of it anymore. I didn't want to think about *anything.* I wanted some relief from it all. Just a

moment of it. I just needed to clear my head for five fucking minutes before I went insane.

I turned to face Edin and stared at him. I'd been denying my attraction to him. Or trying to, at least. Refusing to admit it. Being tempted but ultimately refraining, partly because of how weird I'd inevitably feel when Charlie and I went back to our duties, and I had to go back to occasionally killing the monsters who attacked us. I'd worried that my judgement would become clouded if I got too close to Edin. I'd worried that someone in the military might somehow know what I'd done if I'd… been intimate with him.

Now, I didn't think I cared anymore.

"Want to fuck?" I blurted out before I could talk myself out of it. My face went hot, but I squared my shoulders and stared at him, waiting for him to answer. If he said no, fine. I'd go and furiously jerk off to try and ease some of this tension inside me. I didn't think he would, though. I was pretty sure he wanted this as bad as I did.

Edin's face jerked with shock. He stared back at me for a moment, before his eyelids dropped a little, heat flooding through them. His expression made me swallow, cock twitching in my pants.

"Yes, Hunter. I do." His voice was so deep, intimately so, as he sauntered closer to me, until I had to tilt my head back to look up at him. He raised a hand and grasped the side of my neck, not a particularly gentle touch, but then his thumb brushed softly over my chin.

I shivered at the feel, reaching out and resting my hand on his side, just above the waistband of his kilt. His skin was so hot and smooth. My fingers instinctively gripped tighter.

Edin rumbled out a pleased little sound. "I've wanted to fuck you since the first moment I saw you, josdo," he said, and my heart started to pound harder in my chest.

"Josdo?" I repeated, trying to pronounce it just how he had—*joz-doh*. My voice was hoarse. "What does that mean?"

Edin grinned wide, fangs glinting as he leaned forward. "It means 'morsel', human. Because that day we met, when I told you I didn't want to eat you…" He leaned even closer to nuzzle my ear, making a pleasant shiver run up my spine. "…*I lied*."

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“You… lied?” I repeated. It took a moment for my lust-fogged brain to process what he meant—its implication. When it clicked, my dick started thickening against my thigh down the leg of my pants.

“I lied,” Edin repeated, one hand reaching forward. I jerked, abs tightening when I felt warm fingertips slip beneath the bottom of my shirt and stroke the trail of hair beneath my navel. *Oh fuck*.

“I want to run my tongue over every inch of your beautiful body,” Edin rumbled. He made a low sound. “You’re so much bigger and stronger than other humans I’ve seen. I want to touch you all over.”

Oh shit, okay. I swallowed. “Sounds good,” I said, voice thick with lust.

Edin let out an amused little rumble, and the fingers on my abs trailed lower. I sucked in a breath when I felt them hook just beneath the waist of my pants, stroking back and forth. He leaned forward again, lips brushing my ear. “Take these off for me, Hunter,” he rasped.

Holy fuck, if he kept talking to me in that impossibly deep, growly voice, I’d do anything he wanted. Heat burning low in my gut, I took a step back and reached behind my neck to fist my shirt and pull it off over my head. I locked eyes with Edin as I reached down and started undoing my pants, taking another step back closer to the bed.

He was watching me intently, those oversized irises almost completely eclipsed by his wide pupils. His fingers flexed by his sides, eyes roaming over my bare chest. He licked his lips when his gaze dipped lower, eyeing up that trail of hair descending from my navel. It was such a turn-on knowing it turned *him* on so bad. My cock throbbed in my boxer briefs.

I stripped them off with my pants, quickly ripping off my boots and socks at the same time. Then I stood back up straight and rested my hands on my hips, staring back at Edin boldly. Daring him to come and do something. To follow through on his words.

He let out a low little growl and stalked closer. Normally I’d be fighting the power imbalance here, demanding Edin get naked too so I wasn’t the only vulnerable one. But a part of me… liked it.

My dick jerked against my thigh, the semi I was already sporting filling up rapidly until it pointed up towards Edin, straining for him. It had been so

fucking long since I'd been naked with another person. Anticipation was already tightening my balls, and I scraped my teeth over my lower lip as I imagined what Edin's body would feel like against mine. Hot. Firm. He was so ripped he could easily pick me up and pin me against a wall as he…

"Lay back on the bed, Hunter," Edin purred, and my throat bobbed as I swallowed. I sat down on the side of the bed. It was tall, with two mattresses piled up on the box spring frame, so my head was level with Edin's chest as he stood in front of me. I scooted back a little until I could bend my knees and my legs rested comfortably on the mattress. I had a moment of indecision as I wondered if I should take off my prosthetic. I would have preferred to, so I wasn't distracted by it, but it felt too… vulnerable. Charlie was the only other person who'd seen me without it outside of medical officers, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to stand the sight of any pity in Edin's eyes.

So I ignored it, instead leaning back on my elbows so that my naked body was spread out before Edin as he loomed over me, standing between my slightly spread knees at the side of the bed. I was self-conscious about the scar on my face, and the stump beneath my left knee, but I was proud as shit of everything in between.

I suppressed a shiver when his hot gaze raked over me from my face down to my chest and stomach. Edin made a rumbly little sound of pleasure as his eyes travelled lower and stopped on my stiff dick, twitching against my abs. "Mm." He smirked up at me through his eyelashes. "You have a nice big cock."

I coughed out a short laugh, lips curving up into a grin. Edin stilled, staring at me. "You are even more handsome when you smile like that, josdo," he told me, his voice a rumbly purr.

A wave of insecurity rushed through me, causing the smile to die just as fast. I could feel my scar stretching, pulling that side of my mouth tighter.

Edin frowned. "Why did you stop?"

I made a frustrated noise and rolled my eyes. "Because I—" I shook my head and jerked my chin down impatiently. "Just… go back to admiring my dick instead."

Edin rumbled out a little laugh, gaze dropping back down to my cock. It twitched in response. He looked back up at me with a smirk. "Can I touch it, josdo?"

Fuck. I nodded. “Yeah.” My voice had dropped low with anticipation. I licked my lips, watching Edin. “Touch it.”

He stepped closer between my knees, until I felt the fabric of his kilt brush my inner thighs. I shivered, but then my body tensed up when hot hands slid up my outer thighs. Edin’s hands were so big that his thumbs trailed up my sensitive inner thighs as they moved higher, and it wasn’t like any part of me was small. My dick jerked against my tense stomach as his fingers got closer.

Edin’s left hand curled around my hip, gripping tight, as his right grabbed my cock in a firm, unyielding grip. My hips jerked, breath leaving me in a rush. God, I couldn’t even remember the last time anyone had touched me like this.

“Mmm.” Edin’s fist gave my dick a slow, mindnumbing pump from base to tip. “So hard already.”

“Uh-huh.” My voice came out tight and muffled as I bit down hard on my lower lip, suppressing the groans already trying to escape. Jesus, I was really hard up. He’d barely even touched me. My ass was tensing with every pump of his fist, flexing my cock in his grip. My shoulders were tight where I was propped up on my elbows, but I didn’t want to miss a second of what he was doing.

Especially when that hand gripping my hip let go to trail down. When his fingers feathered lightly over my balls, I sucked in a sharp breath between my teeth, feeling them tighten up. But then those fingers continued lower, stroking over my taint, pulling a rough sound from my throat.

“Can I touch you here, Hunter?” Edin asked, his voice somehow even deeper. I jerked with a grunt when fingertips brushed my hole, making it clench in response.

I was already nodding. “Yeah,” I rasped, voice hoarse. My thighs spread wider, hips tilting a little to open myself up more. When Edin lifted his hand to suck two of his fingers into his mouth, eyes hot on mine, I felt my belly swoop with anticipation. My fingers curled into the sheets either side of my hips, gripping tight.

That hand dropped again, and a second later I felt a slick fingertip stroking my asshole in tight little circles. “Ungh, shit,” I gritted out between clenched teeth, nerve endings sparking to life and sending hot pleasure into my nuts, pulling them tight to my body. When Edin started slowly

breaching my ass with a fingertip, my head fell back as I let out a low groan. “Fuck.”

Edin *mmm*’ed, his right hand abandoning my throbbing dick to palm my inner thigh. I mourned the loss of it for a second, but I would’ve come way too soon if he’d kept up those slow pumps anyway. With it gone, all my focus pulled to the finger sinking inside my ass. I could feel my body gripping it tight, and I relished the little sting before it faded.

His knuckles brushed my ass, and Edin squeezed my thigh. “You’re so hot inside,” he rasped. “So tight.”

I nodded impatiently, ready for him to move that finger. To fuck me with it. Shit, I *needed* it. “Keep going,” I demanded, voice rough.

Edin let out a strained little chuckle, but he obeyed. My hips strained up and I grunted as his finger started to move, pumping in and out of me in slow but firm thrusts. It wasn’t long before my hips were moving in time with that thrusting finger, every muscle in my body tight with tension, my cock jerking against my stomach, leaking everywhere. When Edin inched a second finger inside, I groaned out a long, low sound at the feel. God, his fingers were *so big*.

They sank deep, making me moan. I felt Edin’s fingers stroke over my prostate, and my hips jerked up in response. “Oh shit.” I raked my teeth over my lower lip. “There. Right there.”

“Here?” Edin stroked my prostate again, firmer this time.

I nodded frantically as my chest started heaving with my panting breaths. “Yeah, yeah, there. Fuck.” My knees fell open wider and I drew them up to give Edin more room.

I shouldn’t have demanded he focus on my prostate, because after that he was *relentless.* He plunged his fingers inside, the pads stroking my spot with firm pressure that was making my thighs twitch. Jesus, his long fingers felt *so fucking deep*. “Shit, scratch,” I gritted out, arms bulging with tension as I kept myself propped up on my elbows so I could watch.

I stared down the length of my body. My cock was leaking all over my stomach, twitching hungrily every time Edin pegged my prostate particularly hard. My balls were already up hugging the base of my shaft. The muscles in Edin’s pale purple forearm flexed every time he plunged his fingers back inside me, and I could feel my eyes flaring with hunger as I watched.

“You love it, josdo,” he rumbled, deep voice seductively low. “Do you think I can make you come like this?”

I clenched my teeth, feeling my ass clamp around his fingers at the question. Edin made a rumbling sound of pleasure, and my cock jerked hard in response, lifting off my stomach. “Doubt it,” I hitched, fingers curling into the sheets. “But I’m not against you trying.”

Edin rumbled out a laugh, his free hand palming my inner thigh and spreading me even wider. I shivered, wanting to moan when his thumb stroked the sensitive skin close to the inner crease.

“Let’s see, then.” Edin’s voice was a deep, heady caress, making my heart jump in my chest. But then his fingers started speeding up, pulling all of my focus to my ass and what he was doing to it.

Every inch of me turned to jelly at the rush of pleasure, my head tipping back briefly and a long moan escaping my throat. But then I tensed back up, hips straining off the bed as Edin’s hand started moving faster.

And even faster.

“Oh f-f-f-fuck,” I gritted out. It was like there was a vibrator up there, set to maximum speed. My entire body started shaking, pleasure that was almost too intense exploding out in all directions. “I can’t—ah, *shit*.”

Edin just let out a low purr of pleasure. He was ruthless, fingers strumming against my prostate with no hesitation or gentleness. Just single-minded determination to drive me out of my fucking mind. And it was working.

My thighs were spread obscenely wide, hips writhing and straining up off the bed. My cock was painfully hard against my stomach, pre-cum flowing in a non-stop stream that was getting everywhere. My abs were shiny with it, thin rivulets dripping down my sides onto the bed.

Edin groaned. “Look at you, josdo.” His hot hand squeezed my inner thigh, forcing it wider. “Desperate for it. You need to come, don’t you?” he purred, that hand sliding up until his thumb stroked over my tight nuts.

I cried out, head tipped back, eyes squeezed shut tight. “Shit.” My voice was a fucking mess already, and I knew later I’d hate how needy and desperate I sounded in that moment. “Y-yes. F-fuck—make me—fucking come—”

Edin rumbled out a low sound. The fingers in my ass never slowing down, he trailed his free hand up, briefly cupping my nuts, before grabbing my achingly hard dick in a tight grip. I let out a desperate, guttural sound at

the feel, and then my entire body tensed up as he slid that fist up, from base to tip, and back down again. Just once.

That was it—everything clenched up. "*FUCK*." My body shook as cum fired out of my cock almost impossibly hard and fast. I jerked when it hit my cheek and mouth, licking my lips automatically and moaning at the salty taste. I was distantly aware of Edin groaning out a low, desperate sound at the sight, but couldn't comprehend much more in that moment than the intense pulses of pleasure radiating from my prostate, tingling through my balls and up the length of my dick. I could feel my ass squeezing Edin's fingers.

When it ended, I collapsed onto the bed with a guttural groan, totally wrecked. "Jesus f-f-fucking Christ," I rasped out, voice like gravel as I reached up with a shaking hand and wiped it down my face. There was still some cum on my cheek.

Edin gently squeezed my throbbing dick, making me jerk, before letting go as he removed his fingers from my ass. "Watching you come so hard has made my cock ache," he rumbled, big hands trailing down my spread thighs.

I shivered from both his words and the touch, but couldn't get out a response better than, "Ungh." My brain was still trying to reboot after that orgasm. I was shuddering with aftershocks.

I heard Edin chuckle, and then his hands left me as he moved. Suddenly, fingers were smoothing over my head from above. My eyes popped open and fixed on Edin, who was standing over my head on the other side of the bed, looking down at me from above.

"Do you want to make me come now, Hunter?" he rumbled, and my eyes automatically slid lower to the big—*big*—bulge under his black kilt. I licked my lips and nodded.

Edin let out a pleased sound and reached down to the waistband of his kilt. A second later, it dropped but got caught on his erection. My hand shot up to rip it down when he didn't move fast enough.

Edin chuckled as it pooled at his feet beside the bed, but I was already fixated on his cock. "Holy crap," I croaked.

His dick was *enormous.* Long and thick, dusky purple with winding veins and a big mushroomed head that was already wet. His balls were big and heavy, smooth and a darker shade of purple. My mouth watered.

“Come here, josdo.” Edin’s voice was a deep, seductive rumble, and I automatically scooted closer on the bed until my head was hanging off the edge. My fingers flexed with anticipation, reaching up to slide my palms up the backs of his thick, rock-hard thighs.

Edin’s long fingers circled the base of his shaft. I watched from upside down as he brought it closer to my mouth, but stopped just out of reach. I made a frustrated sound. “Give it to me,” I demanded, voice rough.

His free hand settled on my throat, thumb stroking the underside of my jaw. “Open for me.”

I opened my mouth and groaned in satisfaction when that smooth, slick cockhead slid between my lips. I curled my tongue, lapping up his pre-cum eagerly. “Mmm.”

Shit, it tasted good. Edin snarled when my moan vibrated down his shaft as he fed more of it into my mouth.

Jesus, his dick was big. But I was so hungry for it that I didn’t let it stop me. The angle helped immensely, especially when Edin rumbled, “Do you want to take more of me, Hunter?”

I tried to nod, but it was hard with my head hanging off the side of the bed and my jaw stretched wide. I palmed his tight ass and squeezed, urging his hips forward.

Edin got the hint. He snarled and slowly sank deeper. My eyes watered when he pressed against my throat, my gag reflex threatening to kick in, but again, the angle helped. I fought hard to keep my throat open, and a few moments later his cock sank deeper. I swallowed around him automatically, gagging only a little, and felt a wave of satisfaction when Edin barked out a groan of pleasure.

My eyes were streaming, and I couldn’t breathe, but when Edin pressed even deeper still I moaned desperately around his cock, wanting all of it. Every inch. I dug my fingers into his ass and swallowed again. When Edin’s heavy, smooth sac brushed my nose, he let out a shuddering snarl.

“You’ve taken all of me, josdo.” His warm hand smoothed down my throat, feeling the bulge of his cock in there.

I moaned again, but I needed to breathe soon. I eased up my clawing grip on his ass and slapped his hip, urging him to get moving. Edin chuckled breathlessly and drew back. I took a deep shuddering breath the moment I could, but I missed the feel of his cock stretching my throat open. Invading me so thoroughly, so deeply, forcing every single thought out of

my mind. The moment I'd caught my breath, I pushed his hips into me again.

Soon, we had a rhythm going, and Edin was fucking my mouth and throat in fast, jarring thrusts. Even though there was no way I'd be able to get fully hard again so soon after that mindblowing orgasm, my dick twitched against my stomach at the feel of his cock sliding in and out of my throat. I was still sprawled out on the bed, and my hips strained up in time with Edin's thrusts into my mouth, knees falling open wider as I imagined what that big dick would feel like sliding in and out of my ass. What Edin would look like between my legs, fucking me so hard—

"Look at you, josdo." Edin's snarling voice snapped me back, and I realised I was moaning continuously around his cock now. "You're *desperate* for it, aren't you?" I felt him lean forward, pushing his cock deeper, making me nearly choke. I jolted with a muffled yell around his dick when a big hand cupped my tender nuts from above.

That hand trailed down until one fingertip slid back and forth over my twitching, sensitive asshole. "Mmm," I moaned desperately around his cock, hips straining up towards his touch.

"You want me to fuck you hard. Don't you? You *need* it." That fingertip crooked and slipped just inside my ass. I clamped down around it immediately, shuddering, my draws around his cock getting stronger. "Imagine if your superior officers could see you now. Spread out naked while you suck a monster's cock. Practically begging to have it inside you."

Oh fuck. Neither being watched nor public humiliation were my thing, but in that moment the idea of it made my prick jerk and start to thicken again. I moaned around Edin's cock.

He snarled out a strained sound. "You are perfect, Hunter." He slid his fingertip free, circling my rim for a too-brief moment before straightening back up. "You're making me come. I'm going to *cover* you with it."

I groaned in protest. As hot as that sounded, I wanted to drink his release. But Edin was already pulling free, a choking gasp escaping my mouth as I sucked in a full breath. His big hand fisted his cock over my face and started stroking hard and fast.

"Hunter—" Edin's breath hitched, his big nuts drawing up to hug the base of his dick. I reached out and cupped them, stroking and tugging. Then I slid my hand further back and ran my fingertips between his hard cheeks, over the tight pucker of his ass.

Edin's big body jerked, a vicious snarl leaving him as he started coming all over me. His thick thighs were trembling, asshole twitching against my fingers as he practically drenched my torso in thick white ribbons of cum.

"Shit, yes," I rasped, hips arching up off the bed again. My dick was fully hard now, but it was enough just witnessing the pleasure pulsing through Edin's huge, muscular body. I wished I could see his face, but getting a front-row seat to that big, veiny cock firing rope after rope was pretty sweet too. I strained my neck to lick his tight balls and heard Edin snarl with pleasure.

When his orgasm ended long moments later, I was panting, insanely turned on again, my hands gripping the sides of his ass. Edin let out a rumbling, sated sound and leaned down. When I felt his tongue lick a long line down the centre of my chest, I moaned, cock twitching against my stomach.

Edin moved back until his head was over mine, still upside down. His hand cupped my jaw, gently forcing my lips to open wider. Then he dipped down and stroked his long, cum-covered tongue over mine from above.

Oh fuck. I moaned in desperation. It wasn't a kiss, but holy shit. Edin was a dirty bastard. I wasn't at all surprised.

I swallowed and was about to demand he do it again when he leaned over my body from above me. I felt the bed dip on either side of my hips as he rested his hands there. "You need to come again, josdo?" he murmured, voice laced with a mix of satiation and sympathy.

"I—" Fuck, I couldn't believe it, but I did. What was he doing to me? "Y-yes."

Edin immediately licked a hot stripe down my dick, from crown to base, then slid his mouth over the head and began to suck. Hard and fast, the hot wet suction scrambling my brain. I yelled out through gritted teeth. I was already so sensitive, and part of me was sure I wouldn't be able to come again. But somehow it came so easily, rushing up on me, everything too intense—this whole situation, Edin's mouth, his body, the taste of his cum still on my tongue—

"Oh fuck," I groaned out, body shaking and hands shooting down to palm the back of his head as I came into his mouth. It wasn't as overwhelmingly intense as the first one, but I still shot several hard spurts onto Edin's waiting tongue, his rumbling moan sending vibrations through my balls.

When it ended, I was well and truly wrecked. I couldn't move. My legs were trembling, and I was still twitching with little aftershocks. I just about managed to shift my body half a foot to the right so my head wasn't hanging off the edge of the bed anymore, but that was my limit.

Edin nuzzled my navel for a second before shifting up. I felt his big, warm tongue lapping at my chest and shivered, my skin overly stimulated. When that tongue slid over my nipple, I hissed in a sharp breath, shuddering. The tips of his horns grazed my stomach, making the muscles jump.

Edin huffed in amusement and sucked briefly on my nipple, making my legs quake. I shoved at his head, but that just made him chuckle again against my skin. "Cut it out, scratch." My hand gentled, fingers sliding into his hair as I closed my eyes, exhaling. "Too sensitive."

He pulled back, straightening up to loom over the bed, and I quickly realised I couldn't just lay here, sprawled out butt naked, my cock softening against my thigh. I struggled up onto shaky arms, blood rushing from my head. I felt dizzy for a few seconds, and when I looked up at Edin, I knew my expression was dazed.

Reality started rushing back in. As my head began to clear, I... *Holy fuck,* I was dumbstruck. In the space of about five minutes, Edin's touch had managed to make me devolve into some… mindless, cock-hungry animal. I'd never acted like that before in my life. That needy. That *desperate*.

I stared at him, half in shock and half wary. This was insane. Even though I'd had two mindblowing orgasms, all the worries and stress started pouring back in. This wasn't what we were here for. We were here to get the Soul Eater to help us get Charlie. Not for me to begin my slow descent into a debilitating addiction to Edin's big purple cock.

I cleared my throat and slid off the bed carefully. My legs were shaking like I'd run a marathon. I managed to grab my pants and slide them back on without falling on my ass, but my head was still swimming.

When I heard a knock at the door, all the blood rushed from my face. I looked over at Edin, but he was sauntering into the bathroom, kilt back in place, tail swishing behind him in a way that was somehow smug as hell. He waved an imperious hand over his shoulder at me in an unspoken order to answer it.

I swallowed, edging closer to the door as I scrubbed my fists roughly over my eyes, knowing my eyelashes were wet from what Edin and I had just done. It had to be either Danny or the Soul Eater at the door, and I wasn't sure which one I'd prefer to be standing there when I looked like… well, like I'd just been absolutely ruined by Edin.

Actually, I *was* sure. I would never, ever prefer it to be the Soul Eater. Especially now that he was just looking for any excuse to kill me.

Danny's handsome face broke into a friendly grin when I opened the door. "Hey, I was just—" He stopped abruptly and averted his eyes, looking up at the ceiling as colour flooded his cheeks. "I can come back later."

I quickly shook my head. "No, it's okay, I—" Glancing down, I suddenly realised why Danny wasn't looking at me. I stared in horror at the mess still dripping from my bare chest. "Oh my god." Face on fire, I stumbled back to the bed and grabbed my shirt, shoving it on and wincing as the fabric got stuck to the fluid on my skin. "Shit, sorry, I—"

"It's cool." Danny took a single step over the threshold but didn't come any further into the room, so I crossed back over to him, fidgeting with the hem of my shirt. I saw him eye the rumpled bed, and my face flushed even hotter.

"So um… I came to ask if you wanted some dinner." His eyes got excited. "Wyn found a bunch of tomato plants growing nearby. I can cook them down and make a sauce. I have some pasta. It'll make a lot. Do you want some?"

"Oh." I was taken aback by the generous, unexpected offer. Food was like gold out here, especially fresh food. I recognised the gesture for what it was—a peace offering. Which meant Danny had managed to talk Wyn off a ledge. Specifically the ledge where he was moments away from… what was it he'd threatened? Gutting me? Ripping my spine out of my body?

I liked Danny, a lot, but the thought of sitting in that room with the Soul Eater staring me down from beneath his dark hood… "I, uh…"

"But I can just fix you a plate for later," Danny continued. "You're, um… clearly busy."

Still flushed, I let out a nervous chuckle. "No, not busy. I… That sounds good. Thanks. I just need to…" I gestured vaguely towards the bathroom door, feeling more awkward. My voice was even deeper and raspier than normal, seeing as I'd just been throat-fucked by a giant purple dick. "Just want to take a quick shower, then—"

“It’s cool. I’ll fix you a plate for later. We’ll be able to hang out when Wyn and Edin go into the koleb camp.” Danny paused. “Honestly, dude, you… should take a nap.” He snickered. “You look wrecked.”

My face flamed, but I shoved at his shoulder as my mouth curved into a tiny smile. “Fuck off.”

Danny laughed and held up his hands in placation. “Hey, man, I am the last guy in the world who can judge.”

Yeah, about that. I was desperate to know how *that* whole situation had happened. And now that I had Danny alone without the Soul Eater looming over us, waiting for a reason to murder me, I had my chance to ask him. “So what—”

“Danny!” Edin’s voice boomed from behind me, and I turned to watch him approach with a huge grin on his face. Something twisted in my gut as I eyed him looking far too happy to see the guy. The young, handsome guy who was quick to smile and had a sunny disposition. Basically everything I wasn’t.

I didn’t know if Danny was particularly perceptive, or if the ridiculous jealousy was more obvious on my face than I thought, but he shot me a glance before smiling at Edin. “Hey, man. I was just asking Hunter if he wanted some food later.”

“That’s nice.” Edin stopped beside me, but he didn’t seem to notice how stiff I’d gone. “Come in. Where’s Wyn?”

Danny shook his head and took a step back, over the threshold so he was in the hallway again. “He’s back in our room, so I should probably go. You’re coming over later to get him though, yeah? To go into the koleb camp?”

At Edin’s nod, Danny shot me a quick smile. “Cool. See you both later, then.” With that, he turned and walked down the corridor, whistling some country song I had faint memories of from my childhood.

After I closed the door, Edin turned to me and palmed the side of my neck. I hated the way my pulse jumped at his touch, because I knew he’d be able to feel it against his palm. But he didn’t say anything, just grinned at me and leaned forward to rub his cheek over my temple in a weird, cat-like gesture.

“How are you feeling, josdo?” he asked me, his big hand sliding down and squeezing my trap. “You feel less tense. Looser.” He let out a little rumbling sound. “I should make you come more often.”

I flushed hot and gave him a half-hearted little shove in the gut. “So fucking arrogant.” I felt my lips twitch when he let out a deep chuckle.

But then I shivered when warm lips brushed the shell of my ear. A lock of his long, messy hair brushed my face. “You made me come so hard, josdo,” he murmured in my ear, his deep voice vibrating down the side of my neck.

I bit my lip at his words, hands automatically curling round his hips and gripping tight. I couldn’t think of anything to say, but I realised suddenly that we hadn’t even kissed yet—and I really, really wanted to kiss him. My cheekbone brushed his as I turned my head, my destination obvious, but just before our lips could meet, Edin leaned back.

I cleared my throat and took a step back, releasing his hips and looking down to mask my embarrassment. Okay, he didn’t want to kiss me then. Fine. I could understand it—wasn’t like I had a pretty mouth. “I need to go have a shower,” I said abruptly, trying to get rid of the heat I could feel in my face through sheer willpower alone.

Edin paused. “Of course.” I could feel his big eyes on me. “Drink some water, josdo.” He reached up and scrubbed a hand over the back of my head affectionately. “And then maybe a nap. I wore you out.”

I glanced up to see him smirking at me, and it helped me to move past the awkwardness of the moment before. I rolled my eyes and gave his rock-solid stomach another little shove as I walked past him, making my way to the bathroom. “So bossy.”

“Not my fault I always know what’s best,” I heard him say in an arrogant tone, and I let out a dismissive sound before shutting the bathroom door behind me, glad he couldn’t see the little smile on my face.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Wyn, this is ridiculous.”

The Soul Eater remained silent as he finished binding my wrists together—so tight I wanted to wince. I forced myself not to, though, unwilling to give Wyn the satisfaction.

Danny huffed and spoke again. “Seriously, I really don’t think this is—”

“It’s fine,” I interrupted, nodding at Danny, who was chewing his lip and watching us with an anxious, embarrassed expression. “I don’t mind.”

If the Soul Eater needed to tie me up to feel comfortable leaving me with Danny, I’d deal with it if it meant he’d help Edin get Charlie. He’d already taken my gun and given it to Danny, which had made me itchy with tension, but I’d let him.

Edin was watching us with his big arms crossed and a slight frown pulling down his brows. I shot him a small smile to let him know I was fine with it, but barely suppressed my grimace a second later when Wyn’s cold fingers brushed my skin. I stiffened with indignation when he started tying my bound wrists to the radiator, but still didn’t protest.

Danny exhaled, wiping a hand down his face and muttering to himself as he turned back to the kitchen counter to carry on preparing our dinner. I wondered for a moment how I was going to eat. I drew the line at letting Danny handfeed me. I’d rather go hungry.

“Hunter isn’t going to hurt Danny, Wyn.” Edin’s deep voice was unsettled, and I could see how unhappy he was that I was being tied up. “This is unnecessary.”

“Honestly, I don’t mind. I get it,” I forced myself to say. Obviously I *did* mind. I minded very fucking much that I was being made so vulnerable. What if monsters stormed the building? Or raiders? I’d just have to sit here like a chump. The only reason I was letting this happen was because I knew it was the only way to keep the Soul Eater on side—not that I was under any illusions that I’d be able to take him down and stop him from doing anything. But the fact that Wyn was still willing to help me despite his deep-rooted—and clearly well-placed—mistrust and dislike of the military meant I wasn’t going to rock the boat.

Edin huffed and turned away, pacing over to the window to wait for Wyn. I stayed stock still as Wyn finished tying my wrists to the radiator, my skin prickling with goosebumps at his proximity. I could have sworn the air was actually colder close to him.

My scalp tingled with deep-seated, instinctive alarm when the Soul Eater spoke, his distorted voice soft, his words only for me. “If you touch Danny, if you hurt him in any way, I will punish you, human,” he told me. “I will slice you open and tear out your organs one by one while you are still alive, and then I will do the same to your little friend.”

I swallowed, sweat beading on my upper lip. “I don’t want to hurt him.”

“I don’t trust you,” Wyn told me bluntly. “I am helping because Danny wants me to. Because Edin cares, for some reason.” I could hear the sneer in his voice. “I am not doing this for you. And I will not hesitate to slaughter your friend in retaliation if you do anything to harm either of them.”

I gave him a clipped nod. It was surreal, realising that the Soul Eater was capable of emotions like love and affection. I mean, not towards me, obviously. But he’d been nothing but a bogeyman for so long that it was unnerving to be forced to acknowledge him as a… more rounded being. Not just an empty, murderous thing that roamed the Wastes hunting for victims.

Wyn finally stepped back, and I let out a full breath. Now that he wasn’t so close, I felt brave enough to speak. “You know, if you let me come with you, you wouldn’t have to worry about—”

“No,” Wyn interrupted in a blunt tone. “You’ll get in our way.”

I bristled at that. “I’m trained to deal with situations like this. I can—”

“I said no.” I realised it was the wrong thing to say—reminding Wyn of my military background—when his voice went icy cold.

I swallowed. “Fine.”

He left me to go and say goodbye to Danny. I averted my eyes, giving them some privacy when I saw Wyn cup Danny’s face in his black-fingered hands. Edin loped over to me and scrubbed an affectionate hand over the back of my head. “Are you alright, josdo?”

I shot him a small wry smile, feeling it tug my snarled lip. “All good, scratch. I’ll be fine.” I went to slug his shoulder, forgetting I was bound until my hands jerked back down. “Worry about yourself. You’re the one going out there to take on a bunch of behamots.”

“Gah.” Edin waved a dismissive hand. “We will manage.”

He hesitated, then reached out and stroked the back of my head again, his touch much gentler this time. Shivers danced down the nape of my neck when his big thumb stroked the shell of my ear before rubbing my earlobe. Our eyes locked. Edin's gaze flickered down for a brief moment when I swallowed with a rush of nerves, tracking the bob of my throat. Then he looked back up, his too-big pupils widening as we stared at each other.

God, I wanted to kiss him. But I wouldn't. Not after that moment earlier in the apartment, and especially not with the Soul Eater in the room, breathing down my neck and just waiting for an excuse to gut me.

Before either of us could speak, Wyn's ghostly voice cut through the air and shattered whatever had locked our gazes together. "Are you ready, Edin?"

Edin's gaze flickered, then he tore his eyes away, caressing my earlobe one last time before dropping his hand. "Yes."

I was vibrating with tension as I watched them head for the door. "Be careful," I said. Edin shot me a grin as Wyn ignored me.

And then they were gone. I shifted on my feet, already anxious. Silence fell over the apartment as the sounds of the two monsters' heavy footsteps faded. I glanced over at Danny to see him chewing on his thumbnail.

He let out a huff and walked over to me. "Okay, Wyn will kill me but…" He shook his head. "I can't sit in here with you tied up like that. I mean," he gestured over at the pasta heating up on the stove, "how are you meant to eat?"

I huffed out a brief chuckle. "I'll manage," I said, demonstrating lifting my hands. "Wyn left me enough slack to get my hands to my mouth."

Danny let out an embarrassed sound. "God. Sorry."

I shook my head. "Seriously, I get it. Don't worry." I jerked my chin towards the stove. "You're feeding me. That makes up for it." I aimed for a teasing tone, but I wasn't good at being light-hearted so it fell flat. I could tell it didn't make Danny feel any better.

Still, it prompted him to return to the stove and get our food ready. I carefully manoeuvred until I was sitting with my back against the wall next to the radiator, arms raised at a slightly awkward angle towards my left shoulder. But it was better than standing for the next however-many-hours.

After a few minutes, Danny brought over a steaming bowl of pasta that smelled amazing, even though my stomach felt too knotted to be truly hungry. I still accepted it gratefully, awkwardly trying to balance the bowl

on a raised knee so I could hold the fork between my bound hands. It wobbled dangerously when I tried to spear some pasta with my fork.

"Okay, this is dumb." Danny squatted down on the balls of his feet in front of me and took the bowl and fork out of my hands. "You're not planning on killing me, right?" he said in a dry voice as he reached for the rope binding my wrists. It looked like the cord rope used for wall climbing. Wyn must have hit up a sporting goods store in preparation, probably when he got the baseballs for Danny.

I shook my head. "No, but… what will Wyn do if he gets back and finds me untied?" I couldn't help but ask the question, my voice wary.

Danny chuckled, nimbly untying Wyn's complicated knots. "I won't let him do anything, don't worry. If you're concerned, we can tie you back up after you eat."

The rope fell away, and Danny stood back up and went to the counter to get his own dinner. I picked up my bowl but stayed sitting where I was, on the floor with my back to the wall. "Thanks, man."

Danny just nodded, already shovelling food into his mouth as he wandered over to the couch. We ate in silence. Even though I was too anxious to be truly hungry, it was the best thing I'd eaten in years. I thanked Danny again when we were done. He didn't tie me back up—I didn't think he could bring himself to. So we didn't acknowledge it, and eventually I got up from the floor and went into the bathroom to change into the spare clothes I'd found, so I could take Danny up on the offer of washing mine while we waited.

Before coming, I'd gone through some of the other apartments to find spare clothes while all of mine were in the machine. I changed into sweats that were too short for my long legs, and a t-shirt with a cartoon hotdog on the front that strained around my biceps. I looked like an idiot, but at least I'd have clothes that had been properly washed for the first time in weeks, rather than hastily scrubbed with soap in a sink or bath tub. I'd grabbed some for Charlie too, figuring he'd be desperate to get changed when he was here. The monsters had been treating him well, but they hadn't given him clean clothes. I hadn't seen any of the kolebs carrying his bag, which meant it was probably long gone.

Once the machine was on, I paced the room, then went to look out the window, hands gripping the sill restlessly. I knew it would take Edin and Wyn some time to get to the koleb camp, but I still tried to work out how

many hours they should be gone. I didn't know how long it would take them to get Charlie out of the camp. My head started to pound, and no matter how much I rubbed at my temples, it wouldn't fade. I couldn't sit down, and I knew my palpable agitation was starting to get to Danny as I paced the small room. He probably already regretted untying me from the radiator. He had found an old jigsaw puzzle of the waterfalls on the Big Sioux River and was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the coffee table, totally relaxed and at ease as he picked out the edge pieces.

I turned to look at him. I wanted to thank him for convincing Wyn to still help get Charlie, for being so welcoming and kind, but at the same time I also wanted to yell at him. How could he be so fucking calm, sitting there doing a goddamn jigsaw puzzle? The rational part of my brain stopped me. Of course Danny was calm. He didn't know Charlie. And his boyfriend was basically immortal, so it wasn't like he was worrying about *him*, either.

Shit. I chewed on my lower lip nervously, pacing back to the window. Was *Edin* as indestructible as Wyn was? He hadn't said. I remembered him telling the raiders back in that tiny town that a bullet wouldn't stop him, but I still didn't know if he'd been bluffing or not. It felt like asking Danny would be too obvious, and it wouldn't make a difference now, anyway. Edin was out there trying to get Charlie back. For me. Going up against at least six behamots.

For me.

"Why don't you sit down, Hunter?" Danny had put together the outer edges of the jigsaw and was now sorting pieces by colour. "They'll be a while yet. You want a beer?"

"I'm good," I said shortly, pacing my path from the window to the kitchen and back again. I couldn't sit in this apartment drinking beer while Charlie was still captured, and Edin was out there trying to get him back. I wished I'd been able to go with them, so I could actually be *doing* something instead of sitting here with my thumb up my ass.

I could tell my restless pacing was starting to irritate Danny, though, so I crossed the room and sat down on the couch, next to where he was lounging on the floor. My knee started bouncing straight away, too much nervous energy inside me to keep completely still. I saw Danny side-eye me, but he didn't say anything.

I wiped a rough hand over my lower jaw, hearing the rasp of my calloused fingers scraping against stubble. I stared at the puzzle with

unseeing eyes. “How long do you think they’ll be?”

“Probably hours.”

My jaw clenched. I didn’t like Danny’s answer. Instead of acknowledging it, I pointed towards the puzzle piece he’d just fitted. “That doesn’t go there.”

“What?” Danny leaned forward a little to peer down at it. “Yeah it does.”

“No, it doesn’t. You’ve just rammed it in.”

“No, I haven’t!” He sounded defensive. “That’s the bottom half of the people standing there.” He pointed. “See?”

I leaned forward to point as well. “No, it’s the wrong piece. There’s still a floating head with no body now. Look.”

Danny looked at it a while longer, before he huffed and yanked the piece back out. “Whatever, dude,” he muttered. “Puzzles are supposed to be *relaxing*.”

“I’m not good at relaxing.”

“Oh, really? I hadn’t noticed.”

I narrowed my eyes at Danny’s profile, but he kept his head bent over the puzzle with an innocent expression, picking through the pieces.

“I’ll *relax* when Charlie and Edin are both here in this room.” After a second, I tacked on,” And, uh, Wyn, obviously.”

Danny snorted. He slotted another jigsaw piece into the puzzle. “You need to stay calm. If they can safely get him out, they will.”

“What?” I pounced on that immediately. “*If*? Did Wyn say something? Did he say they might not get him?”

Danny looked up at me, brow furrowed. “He just said that if there really are that many behamots, it’s going to be difficult. They’re just real hard to kill, Hunter. Even for Wyn and Edin.”

I exhaled roughly. “Fuck’s sake,” I muttered under my breath, rubbing at my aching forehead. “I’m going to lose my fucking mind sitting here waiting.”

Danny made a low sound in sympathy. “I know how that feels.” He glanced up at me briefly. “Let’s talk about somethin’ else, huh?”

I let out another low breath, scrubbing at my jaw. “Okay. Uh…” I realised this would probably be the only time I’d be with Danny alone, so I decided to ask what I’d been curious about. “So you and the Soul Eater… How did that happen?”

His mouth twisted up into a grin, and he slotted in another puzzle piece. “Kinda wild, right? I was part of the unit that went out to capture him. I was the only survivor, so they made me try and get Wyn to give them information.” He shrugged. “Then Wyn let all the monsters out and escaped, taking me with him so I wouldn’t get killed while the base was being destroyed by angry specimens.”

“How did he get free? I thought those cells were impenetrable.”

“His smoke thing. He got through the vents they have in the cells to pump gas into them. To torture them.” His shoulders tensed up as he said it, bending back over the puzzle.

I watched him. “So they did torture them there, then.”

“Yeah.” Danny’s voice was tight. “Hasn’t Edin told you about it?”

I stared at him, confused. “What do you mean?”

Danny put down the puzzle piece in his hand and looked at me. “Hasn’t Edin told you about what they did to him there?”

My palms went clammy. “What they… did to *him* there?”

Danny’s brows shot up. “He hasn’t told you he was one of the specimens?”

“What?” My mouth went dry. “One that Wyn set free? Was that why he did it? Because they’d captured Edin?”

Danny shook his head. “No. Edin was specimen zero-zero-two. The one that got free about ten years ago. He’s the reason they redid all the cells to make them stronger.”

“Are you shitting me?” I choked out. Why the hell had he never mentioned that?

Danny’s lips quirked on one side into a lopsided smile. “I’m not shitting you. Haven’t you seen the brand on his jaw?” He tilted his head back and pointed to a spot under the right side of his jawbone.

I shook my head slowly. “No, I… I had no idea,” I croaked. Yet more shit for my overworked brain to unpack. I couldn’t deal with it right then. “So, um…” I rubbed my face. “Wyn got out, and took you with him…?”

Danny nodded, back to his puzzle. “Yeah. He asked if I wanted to make my own way, or stay with him.” He shrugged. “I chose to stay with him and… yeah.”

I eyed him. “And you could just overlook the whole murdering humans thing,” I deadpanned.

Danny glanced over. “I thought Edin would have told you about the parasites.”

I quirked a brow. So he’d fallen for that, huh? “He mentioned it.” My tone was entirely doubtful.

Danny chuckled. “You think it’s a crock of shit?”

“Yeah, I do,” I said bluntly. “If it was true, how has no one heard about it? How is the military not all over that?”

“It is true.” When I just looked at Danny, he nodded emphatically. “It is, dude. I’ve seen them.”

“What, you mean you’ve seen *‘infected humans’*?” I asked around air quotes.

“No—well, yes, but I mean I’ve literally seen the parasites. And I’ve seen a human host throwing up the eggs.”

I shot him a look. “The fuck?”

Danny nodded. “I know it sounds unbelievable, but trust me. It’s true.” He reached over and thumped my arm with his fist. “I’m not in love with a psychopathic serial killer.”

My brows hiked up at that. “In love with him, huh?”

Danny smiled, his expression turning disgustingly soppy. “Yeah.”

I cleared my throat, picturing Wyn’s cloaked, ghoulish figure. Those blackened fingertips. That freaky fucking *voice*. “Uh… congrats.”

Danny laughed. “Thanks.”

I stared at him, something like jealousy gnawing inside me. He seemed so happy. So sure in himself, and in his relationship with Wyn, even though it was so freaking unconventional.

We sat there for a long time, Danny calmly doing the puzzle while I stared at it through unseeing eyes, overly tense, my leg bouncing again. I jumped when the washer beeped at us. I heaved myself up off the couch and went to transfer the laundry into the dryer. The rapid click as I turned the machine’s dial was a sound I hadn’t heard in years. It sent a wave of familiarity through me, reminding me of my childhood before the monsters rose. Both my parents had been military, although my mom had been out on the field while my dad sat behind a desk. I spent my younger years painfully aware of how resentful he was to be the one left at home looking after me, and that had only gotten worse after the monsters came. My grandma had raised me more than he had, but she’d died when I was twelve. By then we’d been living in one of the cities on the east coast, and

my mom had been stationed out at one of the bases in the Wastes. I hadn't seen her since I was ten, when everything happened. And then we'd been given the news that she'd died in a shoot-out with a raider camp.

My dad was still alive—as far as I was aware—but we'd grown even more distant after mom's death, and I'd basically raised myself from that point onwards. By the time I turned eighteen and enlisted, we hadn't spoken in over a year.

Dryer on and filling the room with its low, rhythmic hum, I wandered back over to the window. Danny groaned. "Don't start with the pacing again, man. I'm beggin' you."

I gritted my teeth. "Sorry if I'm annoying you, *man*, but you can understand why I'm a little fucking tense."

"Hey." Danny's face hardened as he looked over at me. "You're not the only one with someone out there. There's nothing you can do, Hunter. We just have to wait. So don't be an asshole and come help me with this puzzle."

My face went hot, but I clenched my hands into fists. "I don't want to do a fucking puzzle."

Danny just shrugged, not even looking up, infuriating me even more. "Suit yourself. Stand there in silence, then. I'm sure that will help pass the time."

I ground my teeth together, standing stock still in the middle of the room like an idiot, in my too-short sweatpants and a fucking hotdog t-shirt. After a minute, I gritted out a curse and stomped back over to the couch, thumping down onto it. "You're as annoying as Edin, you know that?"

Danny just snickered, and we bent our heads over the stupid puzzle to pass the time as we waited for them to get back.

We were close to finishing it when I heard a noise in the hallway outside the apartment. I leapt to my feet and heard Danny bang his knee on the coffee table as he scrambled up next to me, snagging his baseball bat.

My heart started pounding, and even though I knew it was stupid to get my hopes up, excitement buzzed through me, making my stomach clench up. They *had* to have gotten Charlie, right?

The door opened. I was practically vibrating as Wyn stepped into the apartment. “Where’s Edin? Is he okay?” I rushed out. I was too frantic to feel any fear in the face of the Soul Eater in that moment. “Where’s Charlie? What happened?”

Wyn stopped dead, hands balling into fists. “Danny, what is he doing untied,” he bit out in a low, furious voice.

I didn’t hear what Danny said back, because in that moment Edin limped into the apartment. I froze, breath catching.

“Fuck, scratch,” I choked out, before rushing forward. “What the fuck, Edin? What did you do? I didn’t—” I swallowed hard around the lump in my throat, wanting to hit him as impotent frustration pounded through me. “You weren’t supposed to get hurt. If I’d known you—”

“I’m fine, Hunter.” Edin shot me a small, lopsided smile, his fang peeking out.

But he wasn’t fine. He was horribly beaten, bleeding and limping. The upper third of his right horn had been snapped clean off, leaving a jagged stump. His eyes were swollen already, pale purple skin dark and mottled across his forehead and right cheek. Blood still trickled from his nose and mouth. His torso was just as bad, covered in huge, deep bruises, big gashes and raw scrapes that looked like road rash—like he’d been dragged over hard ground.

Fuck. I swallowed, still trying to dislodge that lump in my throat. “I’m sorry,” I croaked, wanting to touch him but not daring in case it hurt him worse.

He shook his head. “I’ll be fine in a few hours. I heal fast. You should have seen me when we started walking back. This is nothing.” He shot me his typical wolfish grin, but it just made my chest ache because his mouth was so swollen and bloody.

I took a deep breath. “Scratch, what about Charlie?” I asked, but I was dreading the answer.

Edin tensed, and I saw him look at Wyn over my shoulder. “We couldn’t get him, Hunter.” Edin’s big dark eyes were sombre as he watched me. “I’m sorry.”

My whole body sagged in devastation. My eyes got hot in a rush. I wanted to cry. I clenched my jaw to stop it happening, but my voice still trembled when I spoke. “Thank you for trying.” There was a long,

agonising moment of silence. My chin wavered. “We’re not getting him back, are we.” Edin had gotten this badly hurt for nothing.

Edin reached out and palmed the nape of my neck. “We will, Hunter. I promise, we’ll get him. We’re not giving up, are we?” He squeezed my nape. “This is just a setback.”

I wanted to snort in disbelief. A setback. Edin was half-beaten to a pulp. Was I so much of an asshole that I’d send him back in there for that to happen to him again? Even if it was to get Charlie back?

I shook my head. “I just don’t see how—”

“We will get him, Hunter.” Edin’s rumbly voice was filled with such conviction that I almost believed him. Then he spoke again. “Wyn heard something that will help us.”

I stilled. I slowly turned my head to look at the Soul Eater, who was holding Danny tight. His hood was turned towards me, and I could feel him watching me silently. “What… what did you hear?” I asked him directly.

Wyn reached up and rubbed his thumb over Danny’s pulse point in an absent, self-soothing gesture. His distorted voice curled around me like smoke. “I know where they’re taking him.”

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It turned out Wyn could understand the behamots' *and* the kolebs' languages, and he'd heard them talking as he and Edin had waited for the right time to put their plan into action.

"I could have sworn I heard you talking back to that behamot that day in the tunnels," I said to Edin, referring to when we'd found Charlie in that cage.

Edin grinned at me, but it turned into a wince as he gingerly lowered himself onto the couch. I shoved the coffee table out of the way so he'd be able to stretch out his legs, and heard Danny make a little sound of protest when his nearly finished puzzle jerked across the surface, almost sliding right off. "Sorry," I grunted, but I couldn't care less.

"I can only say a few words and understand even less," Edin told me as he settled back. "Mainly 'fuck off' and 'that's mine'."

My lips twitched. "Useful, scratch." I could hear the affection in my tone and got self-conscious in a rush, aware that Danny and Wyn were in the room, watching us.

I turned to look at them. "What did they say?" I asked the Soul Eater as I sat down beside Edin on the couch. I resisted the urge to reach over and rest my hand on his thigh, as though feeling the warmth of his skin through his kilt would convince me that he was alright.

"They're going to make him fight," Wyn said.

Silence. "Fight what?" I asked dumbly.

"Humans first." Wyn settled his hand on the back of Danny's neck, absently stroking his fingers. "Then monsters."

Fear made my stomach spasm. Monsters? They were going to make Charlie fight monsters? "Where? How?"

"There is apparently some kind of…" Wyn waved one long-fingered hand, "…underground fighting ring further north. They're pitting humans and monsters against each other. Betting on the outcomes."

I stared at the Soul Eater, mouth gaping. "Are you serious?"

"Shit, that's dark." Danny grimaced, leaning closer to Wyn. "Who would want to watch that?"

"Plenty of people," I said bluntly.

“And plenty of monsters,” Edin added, voice a little strained as he shifted on the couch to find a more comfortable position. I jumped when I felt his tail brush my knee, before it slipped down and under the cuff of my sweats to wrap around my right calf. It somehow made me both tense and relaxed at the same time, my body comforted by it but hyper-aware that it was Edin touching me. I flushed when I realised I was still in these ridiculous clothes.

“The kolebs and behamots have teamed up,” Wyn continued. “The kolebs grab the humans and keep them fed, the behamots train them up to fight. They split their winnings.”

Pure, unfiltered rage boiled through me, making my hands clench into shaking fists. “So they’ve taken Charlie to make some *fucking money*? What do monsters even need goddamn money for anyway? Especially out here?”

“I never said they were betting money,” Wyn said, voice flat. “I don’t know what they’re betting. It could be anything.”

“What-the-fuck-ever,” I gritted out. “I swear to god, I’m going to—”

“Hunter.” Edin’s voice rumbled through me. I felt his tail shift on my leg, coiling tighter, as a big hand rested on my shoulder. “Calm. This is good. At least we know what their plan for him is—and it isn’t killing him.”

I exhaled a long, trembling breath as I focused on the twin touches from Edin, trying to calm down. I forced myself to consider the situation objectively, removing my emotions for Charlie. Danny, Edin and the Soul Eater stayed silent.

They all looked at me like I was insane when I let out a short, relieved bark of laughter.

Edin was right. This *was* good. It was infuriating to think that Charlie had been put through all this for some low-life monster shitheads to turn a profit of some kind, but this—*this* was something Charlie could handle, at least initially. I was just relieved that they weren’t planning on killing him or taking him to the monster world or selling him to be eaten. But fighting? If they really were putting him up against other humans to begin with, he’d easily hold his own. It gave us time. It gave us new opportunities to get him back.

“Did you hear where they’re holding the fights?” I asked Wyn.

He slowly shook his head. “Just that there’d be a few more days of travel until they reach it.”

“Okay.” I turned to Edin, reaching out and gripping his thigh, just above his knee. “Okay. This is good, scratch. We can get him. If they’re sending him to fight, there’ll be moments where he’s on his own. Right? If we can get in there—”

“Edin might not want to help you anymore, human,” the Soul Eater drawled from behind me, his distorted voice making the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I clenched my jaw and turned my head to eye him. “He’s just been beaten half to death by several very, very angry behamots.” Wyn’s voice sounded angry—and I knew that anger was directed solely at me. “He’s still bleeding, and you’re already making plans to send him back into some—”

“Wyn,” Danny interrupted, voice hushed. “I don’t think—”

“Of course I’m going to help Hunter.” Edin’s deep voice was raspy, and I noticed dark bruises round his throat. My stomach knotted up with misery at the sight.

And guilt. The guilt suddenly hit me in an overwhelming tidal wave. “He’s right,” I managed. “Wyn’s right.” I swallowed and clenched my fingers tighter on Edin’s knee. “I’m sorry, scratch. You’ve already done enough.” I took a breath and turned back to Wyn. “If you can tell me anything you heard that might be useful before I go—”

“Shut up, Hunter. I’m going with you.” Edin bared his fangs at Wyn over my shoulder. “Mind your fucking business, Wyn. I don’t meddle in *your* affairs.”

“What?” Wyn’s creepy voice was incredulous. “You meddle in my affairs *all the time*, you—”

“This isn’t helping,” Danny snapped, and I shot him a grateful look. “Edin is clearly going to help Hunter, so there’s no point arguing about it. Hunter didn’t know Edin would get hurt, Wyn. He obviously didn’t *want* him to. Stop being over-protective.”

Wyn huffed and folded his arms over his chest. “I just didn’t like the way the human was *assuming* Edin would—”

“I know, baby.” Danny patted Wyn’s arm and shot me a look. “So what happened?” he then asked the two monsters. “At the camp?”

Wyn’s voice was grating, like he hated having to admit failure. “Our plan was for Edin to distract the behamots so I could grab the human.”

“What about the kolebs?” Danny asked.

Wyn waved a hand and made a disgusted sound. “Irrelevant. They weren’t worth worrying about. The behamots were the problem. There were seven of them.” He grunted. “They protected the human fiercely. Several went after Edin, but three stayed. They surrounded the human. I couldn’t get to him. Not without risking one of them grabbing me.”

The Soul Eater’s hood turned, and I could tell he was looking at Edin. “Edin put up a good fight, but it was four behamots against him.” He let out a disapproving sound. “I went to help him several times, but he just kept telling me to keep trying to get the human, even though he was being beaten bloody. Eventually I had to stop trying.”

I exhaled shakily. Jesus. Edin had taken on four behamots on his own. I swallowed repeatedly, throat bobbing as I stared at my hand on his knee through unseeing eyes.

“God, Edin.” Danny sounded devastated that the big purple monster had gotten hurt. “How did you get away from the behamots you were fighting?”

“Sheer luck,” Wyn said bluntly. “They were so busy beating him they didn’t notice me until I was able to drag him out from under them. Then we ran.”

Fuck. I kept on staring at my hand on Edin’s knee, unable to look up as my eyes burned. My heart was racing, chest rising and falling with hard breaths that whistled out of my nose. I watched my fingers clench Edin’s knee tighter in an unconscious gesture.

“I’m sorry, josdo,” Edin murmured to me, his tail squeezing my leg gently.

God. I wanted to… I didn’t know what. Punch a fucking hole through the wall. My chest was too tight, and my stomach hurt. “Don’t be,” I managed to get out, voice harsh. “Please. Don’t.” I worried the fabric of his kilt with my fingers, my eyes burning. I couldn’t lift my head; I could sense Danny and Wyn watching me, and I felt flayed open. Raw.

“I think we all need to get some rest and recharge.” Danny’s voice was tentative. “And we can come up with a new plan in the morning.”

I wiped a hand over my face. “Yeah.”

I helped Edin stand up from the couch and kept my arm wrapped around his back, paling when I saw huge patches of ripped open skin, raw and bleeding, over his shoulder blades. I could feel wetness on my arm.

Wyn stepped forward. “I can help him back to his—”

“I got it,” I snapped, wanting to dig my fingers in tighter to Edin’s hot skin but refraining out of fear of hurting him worse. I remembered what little manners I had when I looked up and saw Wyn and Danny standing there, watching us. “I—Thanks,” I muttered to the Soul Eater. “Thank you for trying. Thanks for your help.”

Wyn was silent for a long moment. “Fine,” he eventually said, distorted voice a touch awkward, like he didn’t know how to react to someone thanking him. I’d take a wild guess that it happened *very* rarely.

“Your clothes—” Danny began as he handed me my shotgun, but I shook my head.

“I’ll come and get them in the morning before Edin and I go,” I said as I rested the barrel of the gun on my free shoulder. “Thanks.”

“Before you two go?” Danny shook his head. “We’re going with you. Right?” He looked up at Wyn, who nodded.

I stiffened. “No, you’ve already done more than enough. I don’t expect you to—”

“We’re helping, human, so just shut up and get Edin to his room so he can rest and heal.”

My instinct was to get defensive at Wyn’s overbearing tone, but he was right. “Fine,” I muttered, leading Edin to the door. He was limping heavily. “See you in the morning.” My voice softened slightly. “Goodnight, Danny.”

“Night, Hunter.” I could feel them watching us. “And don’t worry. Edin will heal up quick. Won’t you, big guy?”

“Of course.” Edin shot me a little grin, his fang peeking out, and squeezed my side. My throat went tight again, so I didn’t say anything as we slowly made our way back to our rooms.

“What are you doing?” Edin asked, confused as I led him into my room and towards the bed.

My face got hot, and I felt exposed. “Shut up. We’re both sleeping in here tonight just in case you need anything.”

Edin was silent for a moment. “What would I need?” he asked, sounding genuinely perplexed.

I huffed, shaking my head, not sure if I wanted to laugh or cry as I helped him settle on the bed. “Just… go to sleep, scratch.” I paused. “Will sleeping help? Help you heal, I mean?”

He nodded, carefully scooting back and laying down with a wince. “Yes.”

I exhaled. “Okay, good.” I stood there, hands on my hips, staring down at him.

Edin watched me back silently for a moment. But then he quirked a brow, and I saw his eyes drop. His lips twitched. “What are you wearing, josdo?”

I looked down and felt myself go bright red. “My clothes are in the dryer,” I said quickly. “I washed them while we were waiting for you.”

“Mm.” I could feel Edin’s big eyes roaming over me. “I like the shirt. It’s very tight.”

I rolled my eyes. Okay, he couldn’t be feeling *too* bad. “Thanks.”

“And the pants. I can see the outline of your cock.”

“What?” I looked down quickly and felt my face get even hotter. “Goddamnit. Poor Danny.”

Edin snickered, but his eyelids were starting to droop now. I stepped forward and sat down on the edge of the bed, hesitating for only a second before reaching out and resting my hand on Edin’s arm. His skin was so hot and smooth. I stroked my thumb back and forth. “Get some sleep, scratch.” I watched his face as his eyes slid shut. “I might even help you take a bath in the morning to get this blood off you.”

Edin rumbled out a pleased little sound, lips curling up even as he kept his eyes shut. “Will you get in it with me?”

I huffed, the snarled side of my mouth twitching. “If you’re lucky,” I said just to humour him.

I didn’t move until he’d fallen asleep, and even then I sat there for too long, just staring at his beautiful, inhuman face. He looked almost vulnerable in sleep, especially when his face was swollen and riddled with cuts and bruises. It made everything inside me clench up miserably.

Eventually I pulled off my shirt and removed my prosthetic, sorting out my leg quickly. I kept the sweats on and lay down next to Edin on the bed after clicking off the light. At first I didn’t think I’d be able to sleep as I lay there in the darkness, staring up at the ceiling and listening to Edin’s steady breaths beside me. I was tense, expecting the worst—expecting to hear him stop breathing, or start choking, or something.

But he didn’t. His breaths were low and calm and steady. Soothing. Eventually, the sound of them spread through me like a cool balm, making my mind feel tranquil for the first time in… weeks. I was able to forget all

the worry, and stress, and guilt, for long enough to drop into deep, fast sleep.

I woke up before Edin, jerking awake and blinking blearily into the morning light. The sky was already bright blue through the window, fluffy white clouds meandering past languidly. I sat up slowly so as not to wake the big purple monster next to me and looked down at him.

The tight knot of guilt and worry in my chest eased just a little when I took in his face. The swelling had gone down, and somehow the bruising had already faded almost entirely. The cuts still lingered, but they were already scabbed. Jesus, his body was amazing. I couldn't imagine being able to heal like that, so fast.

I hopped into the bathroom to take a shower before sorting out my leg for the day and putting on my prosthetic. I found an old bottle of cleaning spray and a dried up natural sponge under the sink, so I hurriedly scrubbed the tub in case Edin wanted a bath when he woke up. After brushing my teeth, I filled my canteen at the sink and was gulping down a long drink of water when I wandered back into the bedroom and saw that he was awake.

He shot me a sweet, sleepy grin, and my breath almost stuttered as my throat tightened up. "Morning, josdo." His rumbling voice was a little hoarse.

I swallowed hard, almost choking on the water, and tried to ignore the aching warmth expanding in my chest. "Good morning." I walked closer to the bed. "How do you feel?"

Edin nodded. "Better." But then he hesitated. "But still… my ribs ache. They are sore." He grimaced.

I leapt into action, finally able to do something useful. To help him. "I'll run you a bath," I said. "That'll help, and we can get the blood off you. Okay?"

Edin nodded, watching me as I went back into the bathroom and started filling the tub. He was trying to sit up when I went back into the bedroom. "Wait, scratch, let me help," I rushed out, hurrying to the bed.

Together, we manoeuvred his big body up off the bed, and I hooked an arm around his back to support him as we walked slowly into the bathroom.

I undid his kilt for him and gently pulled it off, setting it over the towel rail, before helping him into the tub.

Edin let out a low, groaning exhale of relief as he sank into the warm water. “Thank you, Hunter.” He caught my hand, tangling our fingers.

My throat went tight, and I squeezed his hand once before letting go to reach for the ancient bottle of shampoo. “Gotta wash you up with this, but it’s all the same when it comes down to it. I bet they just used the same shit and filled bottles with different labels.”

Edin chuckled, even though he probably didn’t even really understand what I meant, because I was just rambling. He rested his head against the end of the tub with a sigh, eyes closing. His legs were bent, knees sticking up out of the water, and it was still a tight fit for his big body.

He sighed again in pleasure as I started scrubbing him down. God, the feel of his firm, soapy muscles beneath my hands was making me hard, but I ignored it. He was injured. It was totally inappropriate.

I couldn’t stop my gaze drifting to his mouth, though. Especially as his eyes were shut, which meant I was free to look. His lips looked so firm and full. They were a slightly darker shade of lavender to his skin. He had a sharp, pronounced cupid’s bow. My stomach clenched with longing. I wanted to trace that little dip with my tongue.

I jumped when Edin rumbled out a low chuckle, my face heating when I realised he’d opened his eyes and caught me. Edin eyed me for a moment longer, then slowly sat forward in the bath, resting his elbow on the edge of the tub, until his face was inches from mine. His irises were so big, it felt like I was drowning in that deep, rich purple as I stared at him, our noses almost touching.

“Why do you keep looking at my mouth, Hunter?” Edin murmured, his voice so low it rumbled through me, tightening my stomach.

I refused to lean back, to back away from the challenge, even though there was no way I’d be able to bring myself to try and kiss him again. The memory of that rejection was still a little too fresh. Tension crackled between us, heavy and pulsing, making my face flush even more in the steam from the water.

Edin spoke again before I could come up with some excuse, his voice dropping even lower. “Do you want me to suck your cock again, Hunter?”

My breath caught, almost making me choke. “I mean, that wasn’t what I was thinking about, but I’m not going to say no.”

Edin laughed, leaning back in the tub, and waved one imperious hand in the general direction of my lower body. “Strip off and come here, then.”

I coughed out an incredulous sound, even as my cock gave an eager twitch in my ridiculous sweatpants. “Why don’t we table that for the time being, until you’re feeling better?”

Edin grunted. “I feel fine.”

“You could barely walk from the bed to the tub!”

He was quiet for a moment. “Well, I feel better now.”

I wanted to laugh, the snarled side of my mouth twitching up. “Really want to suck my dick, huh?” I couldn’t help that my voice went husky and low as I said it, even though it had meant to just be a joke.

Edin fangs peeked out as his mouth slowly curved up into a grin. “Yes. Will you suck mine again in return?”

I rolled my eyes, even though heat had started pulsing low in my belly. I ignored it. “So *that’s* your motive.” Amusement coloured my tone. “Let’s get you healed up and then maybe we can revisit that, huh?”

“Gah, fine,” Edin grumbled, clamping huge hands on the edges of the tub. He started to lift his big body out of the water.

I jumped to my feet. “Hold on, let me help or you’ll hurt yourself worse.”

Edin stopped moving. “Oh. Yes.”

I slowly helped him out of the bath, grabbing a towel and scrubbing it over his hair to get rid of the worst of the moisture before wrapping it round his hips. I studiously ignored his big dick, which was half-hard, no doubt from our conversation. Edin didn’t comment, but I saw him shoot a quick, shit-eating grin at me out of the corner of my eye.

“Let’s go, scratch.” I started gently leading him out of the bathroom. “Back to bed for a while.”

Edin made a disgusted sound. “No. No bed. I am up. I’ll be fine in another hour.”

I grunted. “You sure?” I looked him over as I helped him sit on the edge of the bed. His bruising was nearly gone already, which was insane. The cuts and grazes covering him were still visible, but scabbing over. The swelling on his face had gone down almost completely.

He waved a hand. “Yes, I am sure.” He reached for his kilt.

I watched him, unsure of what else to do. It felt wrong not getting him food or water, but he didn’t need it.

Edin pulled open his towel open to put on his kilt, and I couldn't tear my eyes away from the strong, muscular lines of his big body. Heat sparked low in my gut again. God, his body was beautiful. A work of art, even with the lingering marks and cuts from the behamots. In fact, they only made him more attractive to me—a physical display of his strength—but I knew they'd be gone soon. His skin was so smooth and unblemished, I'd already worked out that he didn't usually scar like humans did. It made me wonder what the military had done to make the brand on his jaw—the one Danny had told me about—stay permanent. The thought made me feel ill.

My gaze drifted to his neck, trying to spot it, but before I could a knock at the door made me jump. I reluctantly pulled my gaze away from Edin and crossed the room to open it. I nodded at Danny and Wyn, stepping outside and pulling the door almost closed behind me to give Edin some privacy as he dressed.

Danny held out a folded stack of my clean dry clothes, my plain black mask and dark green baseball cap resting on top, both also freshly washed. I took the pile gratefully. "Thanks."

"No problem." Danny gave me a smile. "How's Edin?"

I exhaled. "Much better, but still hurting."

Wyn's hood cocked. "What? He hasn't fully healed?" He pushed past me and shoved open the door, striding into the apartment. "Edin, are you—ugh."

Stomach lurching, I spun to quickly follow Wyn back inside—and stopped dead. "What the fuck?"

Edin was dressed, standing there frozen in the middle of a big, languid stretch, muscular arms up over his head. He lowered them when he saw me, looking sheepish.

"Are you—you asshole!" I stomped forward. "You're not hurting anymore? You lying little shit."

Edin snickered. "I'm sorry, josdo. I couldn't resist."

"Why'd you lie about that, Edin?" Danny stepped up beside me.

"Because I helped him take a fucking bath," I gritted out, feeling my face go pink. "Because he *said* his ribs were hurting too much and he needed my help."

There was a pause, before Danny snorted with laughter. He stepped forward and bumped fists with Edin, who rumbled out a deep chuckle.

I rolled my eyes. “You are ridiculous,” I grated—at the exact same moment the Soul Eater did.

We turned to eye each other, and I could feel him giving me a look from beneath his hood that was as salty as the one I was throwing at him.

So we had at least one thing in common, then.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Danny and I ate a quick breakfast of leftover pasta before the four of us set out. It was unsettling, travelling with the Soul Eater. At first I remained tense, convinced he was watching me, waiting for any excuse to kill me. But eventually, it became apparent that he was more interested in talking to Edin or fussing over Danny.

I'd only just started to relax a little when Wyn stopped dead in the middle of the highway. We were surrounded by sprawling fields dotted with American elms. The only other thing in sight was a tiny rest stop just up ahead on our right.

"Duty calls?" Danny adjusted his grip on the baseball bat resting over one shoulder. His headgear shielded his face from view, but I knew he was talking to Wyn.

"In there," the Soul Eater replied, his hood jerking towards the rest stop. There was a tiny store with smashed out windows, its insides gloomy.

"Wait—what?" I asked as Wyn started walking towards it. "Duty calls? What do you—" Realisation struck me like a lead ball thudding to the pit of my stomach. "Do you—You mean *killing someone*?"

"A parasite," Danny said as though he was clarifying. "He's sensed a parasite. He has to destroy it."

I stared at Edin and Danny in disbelief. They were just standing there. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" I exploded, gesturing wildly at the Soul Eater. "You're going to stand there and watch him slaughter innocent humans?"

"Edin, shut your human up." Wyn waved a careless hand as he stalked towards the rest stop.

My blood boiled. "Fuck you," I snarled, stomping after him. "I swear to god, I will shoot you if you try and hurt anyone."

"Hunter, no," Danny barked, running to grab hard at my bicep. I shook him off roughly, jerking free to carry on going after Wyn.

But then I felt Edin's big, hot hands grab both my arms and wrench them back. "Stop, Hunter. Just *stop for a second.*"

"Get the fuck off me." I tried to twist free, but couldn't. "I'm sick of hearing this parasite bullshit, Edin. Let me go. I'm not going to watch him

—”

“It’s *not bullshit,*” Danny interrupted, sounding frustrated beneath his headgear. “You’ve been out here for years, and you’re telling me you haven’t already seen or learned anything that you once thought was impossible? Why is *this* so unbelievable to you?”

I wanted to laugh. “Because it fucking is! The military has somehow remained *totally* unaware that a monster species is infecting humans and laying eggs inside them? *How*?”

“Because Wyn normally kills all of the parasites in a… specific way that doesn’t really leave evidence.” Danny sounded mildly embarrassed.

I stopped struggling against Edin’s hold, breathing hard. Wyn had disappeared into the small store, anyway. I wouldn’t have been able to catch up in time, even if I could get free of the big monster’s iron grip.

I stared at Danny with a hard expression, panting fast breaths out of anger. “Yeah? Enlighten me. Please.”

Danny cleared his throat. “He kind of… sucks the parasite out. Or the essence of the parasite. I don’t know. It’s like this black stuff…”

“The name is a clue.” Edin’s voice was a low rumble close to my right ear. My body reacted automatically, leaning back a little until the warmth of his bare chest pressed against my back.

I continued staring at Danny, knowing revulsion was twisting my features behind my mask, blazing in my eyes. “He *what?* I’ve seen you kiss him, dude.”

Danny bristled, hands balling into fists. “Fuck you. I don’t judge *you*. You don’t get to judge me. Or Wyn.”

“You’re *defending a murderer*.”

“He’s *not a murderer.*” Danny surged forward and shoved at me hard, pushing me back into Edin, who tightened his grip on my arms.

“Please, both of you calm down—”

I fought viciously to get free, but couldn’t loosen Edin’s grip at all. At least Danny wasn’t doing any more to try and attack me, just standing in front of me with clenched fists, shoulders tight and chest heaving.

I couldn’t see his face because of his headgear, but a second later he stepped back and shook his head, as if he regretted losing his temper. “Look —”

Movement at the entrance of the store grabbed all our attention, and we turned to look as Wyn dragged a weakly wriggling person out onto the

concrete by one ankle. I tensed up again, preparing to try and break free from Edin's grip. I felt him tighten his fingers on my arms in response.

"You don't believe Danny, human?" Wyn called over, his distorted voice carrying like tortured screams. "Come and see for yourself."

"Fuck you," I bit out, fisting and unfisting my hands behind my back, wanting to struggle against Edin's hold again but knowing it would be pointless. The monster was freakishly, infuriatingly strong.

"Maybe he should." Danny sounded weary, stepping back. "Probably the easiest way to show him."

"I'm not watching your monster boyfriend murder someone," I gritted out.

Danny's shoulder's stiffened. I saw the resolve in his posture. "Come on." I knew he was speaking to Edin as he jerked his head towards Wyn at the store entrance. "Let's go. We'll show him."

I struggled again. "Edin, I swear to god—"

"I'm not letting you go until you have calmed down, Hunter," Edin murmured in my ear. "You need to see."

Humiliation and indignation burned in my chest as I was frogmarched over to the Soul Eater and the woman he was standing over. At first glance as we approached, she looked painfully thin inside dirty clothes that swamped her. Wyn wasn't doing anything, just standing over her as she panted weakly, cheek pressed into the concrete.

There was no other movement from inside the dark entrance of the store. "What's she doing out here alone?" I asked, voice tight.

"Raiders tend to dump infected humans when they become visibly sick," Wyn said in a flat voice. "Not all, but most."

I swallowed. I could believe that. The Wastes made people hard and ruthless. It certainly didn't foster any feelings of charity towards the ill or those too weak to pull their own weight in a camp. Dead weight was discarded quickly out here.

And this woman was clearly sick. Now that we were standing with the Soul Eater, I could see that her skin was almost grey, with a faint yellow tinge around her mouth and eyes. Her blonde hair was straggly, greasy and thin.

She looked too weak to move, but had started retching. Wyn took a step back so that his boots were out of reach as her torso spasmed with heaves, shaking arms holding up her weight. I tried to jerk back, pressing myself

tighter against Edin when she started vomiting thick grey mucus studded with darker lumps that looked like… eggs. Or frog spawn.

Whatever it was, I'd never, ever seen a human expel something like that from their body before.

"She…" My voice was faint as I stared. "She needs…"

What? A hospital? We were in the dead centre of the Wastes, hundreds of miles from the nearest city. The sheer amount she was vomiting up was… mind-boggling. Impossible. It just kept coming.

I jumped when she abruptly stopped and slumped face first into the thick puddle of vomit, unmoving. After ten seconds of silence, it became painfully clear that she was dead. Just like that.

I knew the blood had drained out of my face as I stared at the unmoving woman in front of us, laying in a huge grey puddle of liquid too thick and mucus-like to be bile. Then the Soul Eater moved, pulling a simple wooden-handled knife from his lower back under his coat and crouching over the body. I heard fabric tear, followed by a wet sound that made my body break out in goosebumps, before Wyn stood back up.

When he held out the thing in his blood-coated fist, my vision wavered for a split-second. It was a… a big bug-like creature, about the size of a small rabbit. Its body was dark and almost scaly. Its numerous legs were thin and covered in hard bristles, curved inwards towards its underbelly like a tarantula's death curl. Huge flat eyes, almost like a fly's, were wide and unblinking. Its mouth was an open circle of sharp teeth.

It was as dead as the woman. When Wyn flung the creature onto the ground in front of my feet, I jumped, trying once more to move back into Edin's big body. "There. Your proof." Wyn half-turned and gestured towards the huge puddle. "And in a moment, the eggs will hatch. Yet more proof. Tell me when it's enough."

I swallowed against the rush of bile rising in my throat, unable to speak. The fabric of my mask sucked against my mouth with my fast breaths. Edin gentled his grip on my arms—not enough for me to get free yet, but enough for him to stroke his thumb over my skin through my shirt. "Are you alright, josdo?" he asked in a low voice.

I couldn't answer. Shock was pounding through me, but also a tiny thread of relief. Relief because if it was true—if the parasites were real, which was getting harder to deny having just witnessed Wyn cut this *thing* out of that woman's body—then it meant Danny really wasn't in love with a

murderer. It meant I could stop feeling guilty about pushing aside the horrific things I'd believed Wyn had done so that I could use his help for my own personal gain.

A tiny wet popping noise filled the air. For a brief moment, it reminded me of that puffed rice cereal my grandma used to get me for breakfast—the sound it made when you poured in milk and put your ear close to the bowl. I knew my face was horrified when my gaze swivelled to the puddle of vomit surrounding the dead woman's head as it started to… writhe.

The lumps… eggs… were moving. Splitting open.

And tiny versions of the dead creature at my feet were emerging from them, crawling through the grey mucus.

"Fuck," I got out weakly, resting my weight fully back against Edin's wide chest in shock. I jumped when Wyn's heavy-booted sole stomped down on the small creatures, crushing them.

"Hopefully now you will stop getting hysterical," I heard the Soul Eater mutter as Edin gently turned me away. I was still too dazed to get mad at his words, letting Edin guide me away from the rest stop's forecourt.

Danny followed us, leaving Wyn to dispose of the… creatures. Parasites. I gulped.

"Are you okay?" Danny's voice sounded contrite but stilted, like he was asking because his good manners forced him to. "Sorry for making you watch that, but…" He exhaled. "I didn't know how else to make you understand."

I blinked hard and took a deep breath, forcing away the shock. Forcing my brain to process what I'd just seen. "It's fine." I wanted to clutch onto Edin's arm when he finally let go of me.

Danny watched me for a moment longer. "Okay," he eventually said, tone doubtful. Then he turned and walked back over to Wyn. I didn't look over to see what the Soul Eater was doing.

Edin's big hand cupped my nape. "Are you sure you're alright, josdo?" he asked.

I exhaled hard. "I'm fine, scratch. It was just a… surprise." An understatement, but I'd gotten good at processing unbelievable shit fast. I had to acknowledge what had just happened. I had to accept it and deal with it and move on.

Edin let out a little grunt. "I did try to tell you about the parasites."

I rolled my eyes. “I know.” He was right. He had. And I’d been too hard-headed to even consider it. To even ask myself why he might have lied about something like that when he had no reason to.

Letting out a rough breath, I took a step closer to Edin and rested my hand on his waist. “Thanks for not letting me do anything stupid.”

Edin grinned at me, gently squeezing the nape of my neck. “I’m getting good at it.”

I huffed. “Yeah.”

Feeling flustered under his gaze, I dropped my eyes to his chest. His lavender skin had that faint sheen in the sunlight. My eye caught on a patch of scraped skin, almost completely faded now. “How are *you* feeling?” I asked, looking back up to arch a brow at him. “No more fake pain in your ribs, I hope?”

Edin snickered. “They’re fine now. The bath helped immensely.”

I snorted, running my hand up and down his side, feeling the muscles twitch under the hot, smooth skin beneath my fingers. My stomach flipped with sweet pleasure in response. “Sure it did.”

“Mm.” Edin leaned in to rub his cheek against my temple through the fabric of my cap—a similar weird show of affection like before, after we’d fooled around. “Thank you for looking after me, josdo. Did I say that before?”

I fought the instinct making me want to tilt my head up, rip down my mask and capture his lips in a kiss. Instead, I ran my hand round to the thick slab of muscle flanking his spine, unable to stop touching him. “Don’t mention it. You’ve looked after me plenty.”

“Let’s keep moving.” Wyn’s distorted voice cut through the moment, making us move apart to look over at him and Danny. They were standing a short distance from the body, waiting.

We started walking, but stayed behind Danny and Wyn. It felt like there was a definite divide between us now, and I winced as I thought back to what I’d said before seeing the parasite.

“I should probably apologise to Danny,” I muttered, adjusting the strap of my backpack as nerves made my stomach drop. I was shit at apologising. Shit at talking to people in general.

Edin glanced over at me. “It would probably help,” he admitted. “Danny is very protective over Wyn.”

I let out a breath. “Okay. Will you… distract Wyn so he’s not breathing down my neck while I do it?”

Edin chuckled, reaching over to briefly squeeze the back of my neck. “Of course.”

He loped off to catch up to the pair in front, throwing an arm around Wyn’s neck and pulling him away from Danny. A few moments later, I caught up to Danny as he fell a step or two behind them.

“Hey.” My voice was gruff. I cleared my throat awkwardly, reaching up to adjust the bill of my cap. “I uh… I’m sorry about the shit I said. Before. I don’t—” I flushed. “I’m not judging you, I swear.”

Danny was silent for a long moment before he shook his head. “It’s fine.” But his voice was flat, with none of the warmth that it had held every single time he’d spoken to me before. Disappointment made my shoulders droop a little. Looked like I’d fucked up this tentative friendship already. This was why I normally didn’t bother with anyone but Charlie.

“I just… It’s crazy the military doesn’t know about it.” I shook my head.

“Yeah, well there have been—and still are—plenty of infected humans in the military.”

The thought made my stomach turn. “Are there?”

“Yeah.” Danny’s tone was still short.

“So… *do* they know, then?” I asked, uncertain.

Danny shrugged one shoulder stiffly. “Maybe someone at the top does.”

Uncomfortable silence fell. I resisted the urge to adjust my cap again, even though sweat prickled on my forehead beneath the fabric. “I really am sorry,” I said eventually.

Danny exhaled. “It’s fine. I get it,” he said, but his tone still made it clear he didn’t really want to talk to me. “Sorry for pushing you,” he then added in a gruff voice.

“Don’t mention it,” I said quickly, but decided to end this painful situation. “Edin,” I called out, jerking my chin up in a gesture that told him to come over when he glanced back. “Gotta talk to Edin real quick,” I said to Danny, giving him an excuse to walk away and catch up with Wyn.

He took it straight away after a brief nod at me, jogging towards Wyn as Edin fell back to join me.

I shook my head tightly when he reached my side. “He’s still pissed.”

Edin’s arm brushed my shoulder. “Don’t worry. He’ll calm down soon and be fine.”

I pursed my lips behind my mask. “Yeah. Maybe.”

But I doubted it. I didn’t have a good track record with this kind of shit. Couldn’t imagine that changing now. I just had to hope that I hadn’t, once again, risked causing Danny and Wyn to change their minds about helping us get Charlie back.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

We walked in silence for a while, the low murmurs between Wyn and Danny drifting back every now and then. I could tell when Danny calmed down some, because his posture got looser as he walked, and he laughed a few times at something Wyn said. I could *not* imagine the Soul Eater ever being at all funny, but whatever.

Eventually we stopped for a rest break. I pulled down my mask and took out my canteen to have a long gulp of water as I settled at the thick base of a huge oak tree, wincing as I stretched out my left leg. My stump felt sore, and I absently massaged just below my knee as I drank. The rough bark pulled at my shirt, scraping the skin of my back. I could hear the leaves moving lazily in the breeze above me, and I relished the shade under the tree's canopy. It wasn't overly hot, but walking for hours in the sun wasn't exactly comfortable.

A bird somewhere above me trilled out a sharp, musical sound. My grandma had always loved bird watching, when my family had lived in upstate New York before the monsters rose. She used to try and get me to do it with her when I stayed over. I remembered telling her how lame it was. Now, I kind of wished I'd done it with her, so I could identify the bird above me by its call.

"Hey." Danny thumped down next to me, dropping his headgear and baseball bat onto the grass beside him. He stretched out his legs as he dumped his backpack between his knees and unzipped it. "I've got something you're either gonna love or hate the sight of."

I raised a brow, intrigued. "Yeah?"

Relief thudded through me at the fact he was talking to me. Danny didn't seem like the type to hold grudges, but I had said some… harsh things. At least I hadn't appeared to have totally fucked things up.

When Danny pulled out two thin, rectangular blocks wrapped in thick dark green plastic, I frowned at them for the second it took my brain to work out what I was seeing. Then I spotted the familiar writing stamped on the side of the package.

I chuckled. "Haven't had one of these in a while."

Danny grinned, passing me one of the MREs. “Wyn snuck into a military base and stole a load of them.” He shrugged. “They have plenty, and these are the only things out here you can find coffee in.”

My mouth literally watered at the word *coffee*, and I started ripping open the package. “Let’s see what we got.” I dumped the contents of the MRE on the grass and sifted through all the plastic squares. I’d eaten these things more times than I could count. “Chicken stew. This one is decent. And rice and beans.”

I pushed them to one side, alongside the ration heater, and tore open the sundries packet. I felt my mouth split into a wide grin when the little sachet of instant coffee fell onto the grass. Next to it was a packet of sugar, and my smile dropped at the sight of it. Swallowing, I tucked it into the front pocket of my bag to give to Charlie when we got him. Because we *would* get him.

Danny and I both shoved the stew and rice packets inside our ration heaters and poured in a little water from my canteen to activate them. As we waited for the food to heat, I sifted through the rest of the MRE’s contents. Some matches, two little pieces of gum, salt, instant creamer, a plastic spoon, a bag of chocolate-covered peanuts and some pretzels. There was a plastic bag to heat up the water for the coffee using the ration heater, and I wished I’d done that first before the food.

Good thing about MREs, though, was that they didn’t take long. Soon, we were shovelling stew and rice into our mouths straight from the bags as water heated up for the coffee. Shit, I couldn’t wait.

Edin and Wyn were sitting together on a flat-topped boulder a little ways away. Wyn was almost hunched over with his elbows resting on bent knees, blackened fingers picking at the cuff of his coat sleeve, while Edin stretched out on his back, hands behind his head as he soaked up the sun. The sight of him sunbathing made my lip quirk, affection tightening my chest.

I forced myself to look away. “This is good. Thanks,” I said. Danny nodded as he ate. “I didn’t think I’d ever miss eating this overprocessed shit.”

Danny chuckled, taking another bite. “Yeah.”

“Is there anything you miss about the military?” I asked him around a mouthful of food. I’d never met someone who’d left before. It wasn’t even a consideration for most.

He snorted. “You’re kidding, right?” When I frowned questioningly at him, he stilled, plastic spoon halfway to his mouth as he stared back at me.

“Oh. Uh…” He cleared his throat and put down his spoon, looking down as he toyed with his food. “The military wasn’t for me. I didn’t exactly fit.” He glanced back at me. “But I guess… I guess you like it, then?”

I looked down at my food, considering the question. I’d never even thought about it before. “I don’t… like or dislike it, one way or another. It’s just a job.”

Danny made a disagreeing noise. “It’s more than just a job.”

I grunted an affirmation. “True. But it’s… I don’t know.” It was just what you did. You stayed in the cities working shit jobs for next to nothing in terrible conditions; you became a raider out here; or you joined the military. Those were the options. “I wouldn’t have been able to stay in the city.”

“Me neither. That’s why I enlisted in the first place.” Danny exhaled and ate another bite of stew. “How long have you been in the military again?”

“Twelve years.” I started eating again too. “You?”

Danny snorted. “I lasted about six months.” He shook his head. “I’m not cut out to be a soldier. What city did you live in before?”

“Boston. You?”

“New Louisiana.”

I nodded. I’d never been there, but I knew that city was almost quadruple the size of Boston. There were fewer safe zones in the south. Along the east coast, we’d been able to spread out more in smaller cities. New York was the most crowded, its city perimeter now stretching all the way up through Connecticut and into Rhode Island.

Swallowing my last bite of stew, I dug out my canteen cup from the bottom of my bag and made my coffee. I couldn’t help but close my eyes, savouring as I took that first sip. It was bitter and watery, just freeze-dried instant coffee. But fuck, it was the best thing I’d had in a while.

Danny was sipping his own coffee beside me, leaning back against the tree, legs crossed at the ankle. He absentmindedly watched Edin and Wyn as they spoke in low tones, their body language easy in a way only years of familiarity fostered. Like me and Charlie.

I settled back beside Danny and glanced down at the headgear resting on the grass beside his left thigh. “Kept your headgear, huh?”

Danny raised one shoulder. “Safer than nothing.”

I nodded, taking another sip of coffee. “We ditched ours before walking down from Minnesota. Had too many run-ins in the past with trigger-happy

raiders. Most of them like to shoot any sign of military personnel or equipment on sight."

Danny huffed. "I bet." He gestured at Wyn with his own dented tin cup, which wasn't a military-issued one. Looked like the kind they'd sold in camping stores before the monsters rose. "Helps having a monster for company. Most people—and other monsters—just avoid us rather than try to kill us." He tilted his head. "Having said that, I *have* been shot at by raiders a few times now."

My lip quirked, tugging at my scar. "Join the club."

We lapsed back into silence, enjoying our coffee as the leaves rustled above us. Danny crunched on his chocolate peanuts, but I decided to save mine, and the pretzels, shoving everything leftover from the MRE into my bag. I drained the last of my coffee, watching Edin again as he sat up, abs rippling, and let out a booming laugh at something Wyn had just said. Again, I was unable to imagine the Soul Eater saying *anything* funny. Apparently the ghoulish monster was a riot, though.

Warmth still spread through my chest at the sight of Edin's wolfish grin, his pearly white fangs glinting in the sunlight. With the warm breeze and the smell of grass mingling with the bitter scent of my coffee dregs, I felt surprisingly… peaceful out here. In the Wastes.

It was surreal.

Eventually Wyn looked over at us and asked if we were ready to leave. We nodded and started gathering our stuff as Edin got to his feet and stretched out his big, muscular body in a languid stretch. I forced myself not to stare.

When we stood up, my left leg buckled for just a second before I righted my footing. As we started walking, following Edin and Wyn, Danny glanced over at me. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but… how did you lose the leg?"

I shot him a surprised look, brow raised. "It's that obvious?"

Danny shook his head immediately, cheeks staining a faint pink. "No, I just noticed the prosthetic last night." He hadn't put his headgear back on, and he shot me a small, sheepish smile. "Your sweatpants were too short."

My face heated as I remembered what else Edin had revealed about those sweatpants. I cleared my throat and answered quickly. "Monster bite. Medics didn't know whether it was venomous so it was safer to cut it off

straight away.” I paused. “The scar was a different incident. Another monster trying to rip my face off.”

Danny let out a nervous chuckle. “Damn.” He cleared his throat. “Sorry for asking.”

I shrugged. “It’s fine.”

But his words made me think about his own scars, and about the explosive situation that had happened after I’d seen them and rudely pointed them out. “I, uh...” I glanced over at Danny, then looked down at the ground as we walked, reaching up to rub the nape of my neck. “I never said sorry for how I reacted to your… to the brand.” I gestured with an awkward hand at Danny’s chest.

“Oh.” Danny paused, then I saw him shake his head. “Don’t mention it. I bet it was a shock. Not every day you see something like that.” He chuckled, but it sounded tight.

I looked at him again. “I can’t imagine how… I’d be a mess if something like that happened to me. You’re so put together, man.” It was the best I could do for a compliment. I was so shit at talking to people—at expressing anything.

Danny huffed in amusement. “Trust me, I was a mess. More about what they did to Wyn than me, but still.”

My shoulders went tight. “Edin uh… mentioned what happened to you. And Wyn.” I cleared my throat. It wasn’t like I particularly liked the Soul Eater, but Danny loved him, and I couldn’t imagine that happening to the person you loved. “I’m sorry. It sounds horrific.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Danny’s voice was still tight, so I shut up. He obviously didn’t want to talk about it. We walked in silence for a while, the faint sounds of Edin’s deep voice and Wyn’s distorted one drifting back to reach us.

I heard Danny take a quick breath, like he was gearing himself up for something. “I still, um…” He hesitated, and when I glanced over I saw that his cheeks had gone pink. “I still have nightmares about it.” He let out a self-conscious little laugh.

I looked at him again. “Well, I’m not surprised.” I sounded awkward, because I wasn’t used to talking about anything emotional with anyone but Charlie—and even then, it was rare. “The whole thing sounds… totally fucked.”

God, I wished for once I wasn't so bad at talking to people. '*Totally fucked*'. Yeah, real fucking sensitive, Hunter. Jesus.

"Yeah. They're not as bad as they were, or as frequent, but…" Danny hesitated and looked over at me. "Do you have… Have you had anything like that?"

I could hear the fragile hope in his voice, that maybe I'd be able to relate, or even impart some secret military trick to getting rid of PTSD. It made me want to comfort him even though I couldn't give him the answer he probably wanted.

I shook my head. "No. I've been lucky. But I know people who've got intense PTSD from monster or raider attacks out here." I kind of wanted to reach out and pat his shoulder, but I didn't. "My grandma always used to say that time was the best healer. I'm sure it'll get better."

They were pretty crappy words—and potentially terrible advice—but it was the best my emotionally stunted ass could do. And probably the best he'd get out here. Hell, it wasn't like psychiatry was still a widely practised field even in the largest coastal cities. The entire country's mental health was in the shitter, and it wasn't like anyone could afford to pay someone to simply listen to them talk about it.

Danny seemed to appreciate it, at least. He smiled over at me and nodded once. "Yeah. Thanks." He let out a breath and gestured at the two monsters up ahead with a jerk of his chin. "I love Wyn and I can tell him anything, but he processes this kind of stuff different, you know? So it's…" He flushed a little. "It's nice talking to another human about it."

I nodded. "You want to tell me about it? Might help to say it all out loud. Vent a bit. Charlie loves to vent at me because I'm not a big talker, and sometimes he won't shut the fuck up."

Danny smiled a little. He swallowed, looking vaguely ill, before nodding. "Yeah. Okay."

He took a deep breath, and then proceeded to tell me everything that had happened to him. My stomach shrank with his words, into a tight ball of… disgust. Revulsion. It only got stronger the longer he spoke, until I knew I was pale and felt as sick as Danny looked recounting it.

"So Hamish is dead," I said, voice hoarse, when Danny finally stopped talking. He was trembling a little, but I didn't comment on it. He looked like he might need a hug, but I was… not a hugger.

"Yeah." He cleared his throat. "Wyn got him."

“But not Mallory?”

Danny shook his head. “No. But if Wyn ever comes across him…”

“I hope he does.”

Danny glanced over at me, looking a little shocked. I wasn’t a bloodthirsty person. I didn’t crave the adrenaline rush that came with killing another living being like some other soldiers—and raiders—did. I just did what I had to do. And in this case, I was on Wyn’s side. If I knew there was someone out there who had tortured a person I loved, I’d want to kill them too.

“I bet you…” Danny hesitated. “I bet you’ve had to kill a lot of people during your time in the military, huh?”

I grunted. “Yeah.”

“And a lot of monsters?”

I looked at Edin’s broad back ahead of me, his pale purple skin giving off that weird sheen it sometimes did when the sunlight hit it just right. His deep bruising had faded impossibly fast, but I could still see faint patches where his skin had been ripped raw. “Yeah,” I said again, my throat tight.

“Do you hate it?” Danny asked me.

I dragged my eyes away from Edin and quirked a brow at him. “Well I sure as shit don’t *love* it.” He gave me a weak smile at my terrible attempt at a joke. “But it’s not like… I guess I don’t feel one way or another about it.” I shrugged. “I do it if I have to. If my life is in danger, or Charlie’s is. It’s me or them. I choose me.”

Danny grunted. “That makes it sound so simple.”

I shot him a small smile. “It kind of is that simple out here.”

“I guess.” Danny didn’t look happy about it though. “I just… I don’t think I’ve got it in me.” He squirmed a little, like he was embarrassed to admit it. “Bein’ able to kill something, I mean.”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“There is, though, seeing as I’m out here in the Wastes. If something else happens when Wyn’s not around and I’m faced with that choice…” He exhaled hard. “I don’t want to be a coward, you know? I don’t want to freeze up and get myself killed.”

I stopped and turned to face him. Danny halted too, his face wary as he looked up at me. “You’d be surprised what you can do when your life is truly in danger,” I said. “What you’re capable of. Your body won’t let you just give up. You just told me that yourself—how you reacted when those

monsters stormed into your room. Self-preservation is a powerful thing." We started walking again. "That's why some raiders can get so ugly out here. When you've been fighting for your life like that for so long…"

"Yeah." I liked to think Danny sounded a little more hopeful, but I couldn't be sure.

We walked in silence for a few minutes, until Edin glanced back at us over his shoulder. He shot me a wide grin, but then his purple gaze slid over to Danny. "Danny, come tell me what you've been up to," he rumbled. "We haven't had a proper chance to catch up. I've missed you, little human."

"Little human, my ass," Danny muttered under his breath from beside me, and my mouth twitched. "Sure, coming," he called back, before eyeing me. "You mind? I know you and Wyn aren't exactly making each other friendship bracelets yet, but…"

I let out a brief chuckle. "It's fine, man. Go ahead," I said, even though my stomach was clenching up at the thought of having to talk to the Soul Eater.

Danny jogged to catch up to Edin, pausing to give Wyn a kiss inside his hood on the way. I trudged behind them, trying to adjust my pace so I wouldn't catch up to the Soul Eater, who was walking alone behind Danny and Edin now. I could tell by the tense set to his shoulders that he didn't want to talk to me any more than I wanted to talk to him.

Eventually though, I ended up falling into step beside him as I got lost in my thoughts. I didn't realise until it was too late. I could feel the disdain pulsing from him in waves, the stiffness of his shoulders telling me that he still definitely did not like me.

We walked in silence for a long time, the sounds of Edin and Danny laughing and talking drifting back. Eventually, I couldn't stand the icy tension any longer, feeling like my muscles would snap. "Sorry for thinking you were a murderer," I said gruffly.

Wyn just grunted in response.

After another few minutes of silence, I exhaled. "And thank you," I said, voice tight. "For your help."

Wyn let out a little huff. "Do not fool yourself, human. I am not doing it for *you*."

I'm fully aware, asshole, I wanted to snap, but obviously didn't dare. I knew full well that they were coming with us for Edin's sake, not mine.

Well, maybe Danny wanted to help me, but Wyn definitely couldn't care less about me or Charlie.

At least Edin had someone out here who cared so much. It made me feel a little better, knowing someone would be looking out for the big purple monster when I had to go back to the military with Charlie. A sharp ache flared in my gut at the thought—as it truly hit me for the first time.

Once we got Charlie back, I would be leaving Edin. I'd never see him again.

Fuck. My throat closed up, and I swallowed convulsively as the Soul Eater and I walked in silence again. My heart was racing as I tried to remember if Edin had ever mentioned where he lived. Or who he lived with.

Was anyone waiting for him?

"What…" I hesitated, hoping my voice didn't betray what I was feeling. "What will Edin do once we've got Charlie? Does he live with others like him?"

Wyn's hood turned, and I felt his cold gaze on me. His voice was disdainful. "There are no others like him, human. Do you know *nothing* about him?" He let out a disgusted noise. "You've just been using him to get your friend back."

"No, I haven't," I shot back automatically, my tone overly defensive, even though my mind was reeling from what Wyn had just told me. I swallowed and clenched my hands into fists. "I know Edin. I know plenty about him."

"Except that he's the last of his kind, apparently."

My face burned behind my mask. "Yeah, well, shockingly that didn't come up in everyday conversation." But his words had made my mind start churning. My belly roiled with unease.

Did I really know Edin? Had I really… bothered to get to know him?

"I know he…" I trailed off, trying desperately to think of something. It took a while, and the silence in the meantime was painful. "I know he doesn't have to eat or drink," I rushed out. "Or sleep. But he likes to. Sleep, I mean. He says it makes him feel energised."

Wyn grunted, sounding entirely unimpressed. "You have described half of the monsters in the Wastes. Is that supposed to convince me of anything?"

I flushed again. “I’ve only known him what, two weeks? And you’ve known him for… thousands of years or something, right? So—”

“You’re right.” Wyn rounded on me suddenly, and I hated myself for swallowing hard and taking a step back as the blackness of his hood filled my vision. “I *have* known Edin for a long time, human. Which is why I am going to be watching you very, very closely.”

Wyn leaned closer, and I could have sworn the temperature dropped in front of my face. “Edin was just an adolescent when I found him. Barely into adulthood. He was badly injured with a leg ripped clean off by a karik. So you could say that I am somewhat protective of him. Yes?”

I swallowed again and nodded. Wyn continued, his distorted voice sending shivers down my spine. “He may seem like someone you can take advantage of, but do not take him for a fool. He is *not* a fool. He is smarter than you will ever be, human. And he is good, even though he has seen and felt a lot of pain in his long life. Some of it most recently at the hands of *your* precious military in that base.”

That made me feel ill, and I knew my face paled. “I know. And I’m not —”

“Do *not*. Interrupt me.” Wyn’s voice dropped, becoming even icier. I shut up. “Edin will continue to help you to his own detriment. It is in his nature.” Wyn’s hood leaned in a fraction closer, crowding me, until I thought I could almost see a pale chin, a flash of sharp white teeth as he spoke. A spike of fear stabbed through me. “If you have even a single half-decent bone in your body, you will make sure that he does not push himself too far at *your* whim.”

I would never, I wanted to argue. *I wouldn’t let him*. But I stayed silent, not in small part due to the self-doubt that crept through me. Hadn’t I already? Hadn’t I already let Edin get himself badly hurt for my sake?

I wanted to squirm. I didn’t want to listen to Wyn anymore, because his words were making me think about things I’d been able to push to the back of my mind, piling all the stress and worry for Charlie on top as an excuse to keep them buried.

But the Soul Eater had just shoved them all to the forefront. Self-loathing was already starting to slither its way into my brain as I pictured Edin’s poor, swollen face after the thwarted plan to get Charlie. I pictured the jagged end of his broken horn.

“I will,” I croaked out. The Soul Eater didn’t stop me this time. “I’ll make sure. I don’t want him to get hurt again. I never wanted him to.”

Wyn let out a mildly disgusted sound. “Did you even consider that he might?”

I had to look away then, swallowing convulsively as my eyes burned. He was right. I hadn’t. Not until it was too late. Hating myself, I shook my head jerkily.

Wyn made another noise. “Of course you didn’t,” he said bluntly, and started walking again.

I trailed after him, feeling sick. When we caught up with Edin and Danny, Edin shot me his now familiar grin, that fang peeking out. It made my chest too tight.

I couldn’t quite find it in myself to smile back.

When we found somewhere to stop for the night a few hours later, after the koleb group had set up their own camp, I still hadn’t really said anything. Edin was frowning at me as he followed me into one of the motel rooms. I knew I should probably have stopped him and told him to get his own room—that it wasn’t a good idea—but I couldn’t bring myself to.

“What is wrong, josdo?” he asked me the moment the door shut behind him.

I just shook my head, dropping my bag and shotgun on the bed. I took off my mask and hat and threw them both down onto the mattress before scrubbing a rough hand over the top of my head.

“Talk, Hunter,” Edin demanded, coming closer. “Tell me. You haven’t spoken in hours. What’s wrong?”

I was going to tell him it was nothing. That I was just tired. But now that we were alone, the words exploded out of me. “Why do I have to find all this shit out about you from Danny and Wyn?” I blurted, turning to face him.

“What? What *shit*?” Edin narrowed his eyes at me suspiciously. “What’s Wyn been telling you?”

“That you’re *literally* the last of your species?” I waved my hands wildly. “And Danny told me that you were captured by the military. You

were specimen zero-zero-two." I stared at him, and saw his jaw clench, but he didn't say anything. "Weren't you?" I pushed. "You didn't tell me."

"Why would I have told you that?" Edin sounded exasperated. "I didn't even *know* you were military until we went to see Danny and Wyn. And it wasn't like you were interested in finding out more about me, Hunter." His tone was matter-of-fact, not accusing, but it just made me feel even worse. "You were focused on getting Charlie back. You still are." His deep voice softened just a little. "Which I understand."

"But I still…" I made a frustrated sound, struggling to put what I meant into words. "I still would've…" I threw my hands up. "I don't fucking know! I still… give a shit about you, Edin!" My face flamed, even though it was hardly a declaration of love. "Now it feels like… I don't know. Like we're still strangers, but not."

I didn't want to say what it really was coursing through me, fuelling this little tirade of misplaced anger. Guilt. Guilt because I knew, deep down, that if I'd asked Edin *anything* about himself, or his life, he probably would have told me all of this. But I hadn't. I hadn't asked. I'd just taken the help he'd selflessly offered and barely even given him a thank you in return.

"We are not strangers," Edin rumbled, his eyes uncharacteristically soft as he watched me. "I know you, Hunter. And you know me." He shrugged a little. "Of course we do not know *everything* about each other. Not yet."

My stomach lurched with pleasant nerves at that. *Not yet.*

But just as fast, I forced myself to shut that train of thought down. "Scratch…" I shook my head, sitting down on the edge of the bed and pushing my forehead into my palms to try and ease the tension building there. "We don't…" I took a breath. "I want you to know how much I appreciate everything you've done for me. For Charlie." I rested my forearms on my thighs and stared down at the floor between my knees. "I would've just died in that fucking hole if it wasn't for you. But…" I knew I should have the decency to look at him, but I couldn't bring myself to. "When we get Charlie back, we'll be… we'll be heading to the military base in Tennessee. To resume our duties." I shrugged helplessly. "We'll have to."

As I said it, a sick feeling rose in my gut. The thought of going back after all of this made me feel incredibly uneasy. I would have to write a full report of everything that had happened, a minute-by-minute account of my movements and actions to justify vanishing without orders for weeks. I'd be

interviewed extensively by officers. I would be expected to give exhaustively detailed descriptions of the monsters I came across and interacted with. Including Edin.

I could just lie, I thought, but even the idea of it gave me a headache. If I lied about Edin, I would have to lie about all of it. About how I'd even gotten out of that damn hole. I wasn't a good liar. They'd see through it straight away. And it would also mean telling the military about the Soul Eater. About Danny. What if they went after him again? I couldn't do that to him. I just couldn't.

Edin still hadn't spoken. When the silence got too much, I lifted my head to look at him, and immediately wished I hadn't. The look on his handsome, craggy face gutted me.

"I didn't…" Edin let out a little self-deprecating huff; not quite a chuckle. "I hadn't thought of that."

I shook my head, gut twisting into a tight ball. "It might not be straight away, if Charlie needs time to recover before travelling, but…"

"No, you're right. Of course." Edin's posture was stiff. It was weird to see instead of his normally loose, easy gait. "Of course you are going back. Why would you not?"

He strode towards the door, walking faster than his usual amble, like he suddenly wanted to get away from me as soon as possible.

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. My voice was hoarse. "Scratch—"

"I'm just going for a walk, josdo," he told me with a careless wave of his hand. "Just want to stretch my legs. They are still cramping up from healing."

I didn't comment on the fact that we'd just walked for hours, and watched him go. After a minute or so, I realised I'd been unconsciously rubbing my left knee, still staring at the door. My stump started throbbing in my prosthetic, and I sighed, heaving myself up off the bed. I couldn't just sit here wallowing, no matter how much I wanted to—how much I wanted to go after Edin and demand… I didn't even know what.

But I couldn't. I had to take care of myself so I'd be able to get Charlie back. I hadn't told Edin my plan yet, but I would soon. And I needed to be healthy, in the best shape possible, for it to work.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Edin was gone for over an hour. By the time he got back, I'd showered, shaved, eaten and brushed my teeth. I was sitting propped up by the bed's headboard, my prosthetic off, feeling uncomfortably vulnerable when he walked into the room, even though my legs were hidden under the stupid, too-short sweats I'd decided to keep hold of.

"Hey." My voice was raspy with nerves, and I jerked my hand back when I realised I'd been running it over my stump.

Edin didn't even look at it, or the empty flat space in the lower half of my left pant leg. I hadn't bothered to knot the excess fabric. "How are you feeling, josdo?" he asked me.

The question just made me feel even worse. He asked me that all the time. Had I ever asked *him* if he was okay? Or had I just assumed he must be because he was a big, strong, ancient monster? I couldn't remember now.

"Fine," I said, watching him as he slowly—reluctantly?—walked over and sat down on the side of the bed. "How—What about you? Are you feeling better?"

His lips quirked into a lopsided smile, the very tip of a fang peeking out. "I'm fine, josdo."

I nodded, head bent as I watched my fingers worrying the loose fabric of my sweats under my stump. "So uh… ready to sleep?" I went tense all over the moment I said it. I knew I shouldn't have. Sleeping together again would help nothing.

Edin stilled. "You want me to sleep?" he asked, deep voice wary. "In here? With you?"

My face went hot. "You might… You're still healing. You should rest."

There was another pause, before Edin let out a low chuckle. "I'm healed, Hunter. I'm fine."

"Just… shut up and get into bed, scratch." I didn't look at him as I shuffled back and yanked down the covers roughly. I knew I'd get too hot in my sweats, but I wasn't taking them off. I did pull off my shirt, though, balling it up and lobbing it at my bag beside the bed.

Edin chuckled and, after a moment, pulled off his boots to get into bed next to me. He was so hot, I could feel the heat radiating from him even

with a foot of space between us. I knew I'd be kicking off the covers soon.

I turned onto my side and looked at his profile for a moment as he stared up at the ceiling. I remembered what Danny had told me and dropped my eyes to his jaw. His head was slightly higher than mine on the pillow, so I could faintly make out the brand if I squinted. *002,* seared into his flesh.

I swallowed hard, wanting to say something but I had no idea what. Instead, I rolled over and reached out to turn off the bedside lamp, plunging us into murky darkness. Faint moonlight cast shadows across the room through the open curtains. I wanted to get up to shut them, hating the thought of something or someone peering in while I was asleep, but there was no way in hell I was hopping across the room without my prosthetic in front of Edin.

I lay there, staring at nothing, painfully aware of Edin's big body behind me on the bed. Neither of us moved, but we were both too tense to even pretend to be falling asleep.

All I could see was Edin's battered, bruised face from the night before. Guilt flooded through my gut like acid, making me even more determined to make sure Edin didn't get hurt again. I couldn't let him. He'd already done too much. He shouldn't have gotten hurt at *all.*

I knew what I might have to do to get Charlie back. I'd be able to hold my own in a fight against another human, just like Charlie would, if it came to me having to enter this underground fighting competition to get to him. But I also knew that Edin wouldn't be happy about the idea. I had to broach it carefully so that he wouldn't just shut down on it straight away and refuse to help. Because I would, once again, need his help. I needed him.

I hated myself for it, but a part of me was almost… dreading getting to where the kolebs were taking Charlie. Not because I didn't want Charlie safe and back by my side, but because once he was, it would mean… leaving. Leaving Edin.

Goddamnit. My eyes burned as I stared into the darkness, jaw ticking, tension making my shoulders creep up. Just thinking about it all was making my head hurt, too full of difficult decisions I didn't want to make. I knew I'd have to, but not right at this moment.

Right now, I wanted to forget about everything. I wanted just a little while without this crushing weight on my shoulders. And I knew exactly what would help. I knew what would distract me. My breath hitched with hot anticipation at just the idea of doing it again.

I turned back over onto my other side, nerves sparking as I looked at Edin's inhuman, craggy profile in the moonlight. Slowly, I reached out until my fingers touched smooth, hot skin. I felt Edin's belly dip beneath my hand in reaction.

I swallowed, lightly trailing my fingertips from his navel and lower, until I brushed the waistband of his kilt. "Edin…" My voice was hoarse, thick with need, and even in the dark my face flushed with embarrassment to hear it.

Edin rumbled out a soft sound, shivering under my touch. I heard the rustle of his head turning on the pillow to look at me through the dark. "You want to fuck again, josdo?" he asked, his voice so deep.

My breath hitched. I nodded. "Yeah," I rasped, then let out a surprised grunt when Edin rolled on top of me in a quick move. My heart started to pound in my chest. "Do you want to fuck me?" I asked, voice bold when I felt anything but. I began wrapping my legs around the backs of Edin's thighs, but jerked my left one back when my stump brushed his skin.

I hadn't been naked in bed with someone like this since well before I lost my lower leg. Shit, the last time I'd fucked someone, a few years ago now, I'd done nothing more than pull my cock out of my pants and rubber up. That had been in an alley behind some shitty bar in a city on the west coast. I couldn't even remember what the person looked like.

Edin let out a low, hot sound and leaned his head in to nuzzle my cheek. I instantly tensed up because it was the scarred side of my face, but he didn't seem to notice or care. I felt fangs worrying my jaw, his leather and wood scent filling my nose as his hair tickled my ear. It made me shiver hard, a reaction I couldn't hide.

"Yes. I want to fuck you, Hunter," Edin rasped, turning his head to nuzzle my scarred cheek again. My stomach clenched up, and my heart started racing. "If you want me to." I could feel his mouth curving into a grin.

The truth was, I didn't usually bottom. I hadn't since before I'd joined the military, and that had only been a couple of times. I was so big, most people assumed I'd want to be in charge.

But I wanted to… give something to Edin, because I'd taken so much. I ignored the oily little voice at the back of my mind accusing me of using him again, right now, for yet another thing. *I'm not using him*, I argued back inside my own head. *We both get something out of this.*

“Wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want you to, scratch,” I grunted, licking my lips, painfully aware of how close his mouth was to mine. Fuck, I wanted to kiss him. So bad. I wanted to feel Edin consuming me. Pushing my head down and forcing his tongue into my mouth, trying to overpower me, letting me push back. I wanted the power struggle. I *needed* it.

He doesn’t want to kiss you, I had to remind myself, because my body was trembling with the overwhelming urge to grab his face and shove my tongue in his mouth. *Don’t do it, don’t…* “But no kissing, right?” I blurted out, the words bursting out of me before I could stop them. My face burned. “I get it. ‘Cause of the mouth. It’s fine.”

Edin’s head jerked back, and in the weak moonlight I saw it cock to one side. “Kissing?”

I could feel the humiliated flush spreading down my neck to my chest. I shook my head once. “Forget it.” I reached down between our bodies and started fumbling with Edin’s kilt.

“No.” Edin stilled my hand, still watching me carefully. His big eyes gleamed in the moonlight. “The thing humans do with your mouths? Pressing them together?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, scratch. That thing.”

“Mm.” He rumbled out a low sound, gaze dropping to my mouth. It made me feel self-conscious, and the snarled side twitched in reaction. “I have never done it. I’d—Wait.” He jerked his gaze back up to my eyes, frowning. “You don’t want to do it with me?”

“What?” I blinked. “I didn’t say that.”

“You just said ‘no kissing’.” Edin leaned up on straightened arms, glaring down at me. “Why not? I want to. You don’t want to?” He stilled. “You said you don’t want to because of my mouth. What’s wrong with my mouth? Is it the fangs? I—”

“Scratch.” I reached up and palmed his big head between my hands, forcing him to stop and look down at me. “Not *your* mouth, you jackass.” I huffed out a breath. “I thought—I went to kiss you before, at the apartment —” My face was on fire. “—and you moved away so I assumed… You know.” I waved a hand vaguely towards my mouth. “Because of my lip.”

Edin’s eyes immediately dropped to my mouth, and I went tense under the scrutiny. “Your lip?” he repeated, sounding confused.

My immediate reaction was to get annoyed. I’d had this before. People acting oblivious, doing that fake little jolt and exclaiming, ‘*Oh, I hadn’t*

even noticed!' Yeah, like hell they hadn't.

I gave Edin's shoulder a half-hearted shove. "Yes, my fucking lip."

He let out a perplexed grunt. "Why would I care about your lip?"

I rolled my eyes and huffed. "Because it's all scarred up? It's pulled tight and the skin's all hard with scar tissue—"

"I know it is scarred. You think I care?" He sounded genuinely baffled.

I flushed. "I don't know," I muttered. "People care about things like that."

Edin snorted, which made me stiffen up defensively. "Hunter…" He rested on his elbows and moved his right hand towards my face. When I jerked my head away, he stopped and grunted. "Can I touch it? Your scar?"

I wanted to say no, but I didn't like how weak it would make me feel. It was just a fucking scar. It didn't even matter. "Whatever," I muttered. "Fine. If you really want to."

When I felt gentle fingertips feather over the snarled corner of my lip, I went stiff as a board underneath Edin's big body. My stomach squirmed. I wanted to smack his hand away.

I didn't, though. I endured his touch, fingers clenching his sides tightly, waiting for it to be over. But when his fingertips trailed up my cheek to my temple, and his thumb brushed softly over my mouth, something broke loose in my chest. I shuddered. "Edin."

"You are so handsome, josdo," he rasped. I just shook my head. "You are," he pressed, head leaning down to nuzzle the scarred side of my mouth. "Show me. Kissing. Show me."

I exhaled a shaky breath and reached up to palm his face again, thumbs resting on his cheek bones. His mouth was already so close to mine already, all I had to do was turn my head to kiss him. He went still, and I could feel him concentrating on what I was doing as I pressed my lips to his.

It felt strange. I hadn't kissed anyone since getting the scar, and I had to adjust to compensate for the tightness tugging at the left side of my upper lip. Edin finally kissed me back, tentatively, and I barely managed to stop myself from making a low sound against his mouth. I'd forgotten what this felt like. How good it could be.

I was probably rushing him, but I was too desperate for it. I parted his lips with mine and swept my tongue inside. Edin rumbled out a low sound that vibrated down my throat. A second later, I felt his tongue brush mine, hesitant, and my breath hitched. It was so hot, and longer than a human's,

and its texture was like velvet. I remembered the feel of it on my dick and grunted, my hips arching briefly to press my stiffening dick into Edin.

He made a low, gruff sound and moved his hips against mine. I could feel his huge cock pressing against my thigh under his kilt, its heat searing me. My heart thudded hard with a confusing mixture of apprehension and excitement. Was I really going to let him put that thing inside me?

Despite having never done it before, Edin caught on to kissing exhilaratingly fast. Soon we were panting into each other's mouths, tongues thrusting aggressively, hands gripping each other too hard. I couldn't stop kissing him, moaning into his mouth, my hands skimming down the hot, wide expanse of his back to grab his ass through his kilt. *Shit*, it was so tight and firm. Edin's lips curved wolfishly against my mouth when I squeezed.

"Take this off," I panted against his mouth between more hard, aggressive kisses, tugging at his kilt.

Edin growled out a low sound and sat up, breaking our kiss to shove it off. When he yanked down my sweats, I grunted and lifted my hips so he could take them off. Only once he'd discarded them and palmed the backs of my knees, spreading my legs wide, did a wave of insecurity rush through me.

Shit. My leg. I flushed, left leg twitching with my desire to hide it from Edin's gaze. But he wasn't even looking at it. His big, hot hands were sliding up my outer thighs as his gleaming eyes focused on my cock. It twitched in reaction, jerking against my abdomen.

Edin rumbled out a low sound. "Mm." His gaze slowly dragged up my body, his own enormous erection bucking into the air as he did so. My mouth watered as I stared at it, even as my hole clenched up at the thought of what was coming.

I sounded like I'd been eating gravel when I spoke. "You have to get me ready." I sat up, resting my weight on one hand so I could reach out and run the other over Edin's tight abs. I raked my teeth over my lower lip as I grabbed his cock. I couldn't help but squeeze, my stomach bottoming out at how thick and hard it was.

Edin grunted and gripped my thighs tighter, fingertips digging into my skin. "I will, josdo. I'll make it good for you."

That made me grin. "I know you will, scratch."

Edin growled and leaned forward in a rush, kissing me hard and pushing me back down to the bed. I grunted into his mouth in surprise and wrapped

my arms around his neck, holding him to me as our tongues fought for dominance.

My breathing was ragged when Edin broke the kiss to bite down gently on my jaw. My hips jerked when his hand dipped low between us and cupped my balls. “Fuck.”

Edin chuckled against my jaw, his hand squeezing gently before dipping lower. When I felt a fingertip brush lightly over my hole, my hips jerked again and my breath caught in my throat. “F-fuck,” I repeated, voice embarrassingly breathless already.

“Mm.” Edin rubbed slowly, waking up nerve endings, sending little sparks of pleasure up my shaft.

When he applied a little more pressure, I had enough sense to pump the breaks. “We need lube,” I panted, leaning to the side to reach over to my bag beside the bed. I shoved my hand in and felt around, distracted by Edin’s hot mouth and tongue working its way down my neck.

When my fingers closed around the familiar tub, I yanked it out. “Here,” I unscrewed the lid with fumbling fingers and held out the petroleum jelly. It was still fairly easy to scavenge, plus the military provided it, so I used it on my stump. But I was more than happy to sacrifice some of it for this.

With freshly lubed fingers, Edin leaned back in to kiss me again as he reached down. I grunted when he started sinking a finger inside, thrusting my tongue into his mouth. When it grazed over a fang, I shuddered.

Soon, Edin was opening me up with three fingers as I writhed beneath his big body, cupping the back of his neck with both hands to keep his mouth fused to mine. I knew I could probably do with a bit more prep, but I nodded frantically to tell him I was ready when he slid his fingers free. I jerked, moaning when slippery fingers slid over my nuts for a brief moment.

I moaned into his mouth before breaking the kiss to look down between our bodies, heat flaring when I saw the outline of his big cock hovering over my stomach. I shivered when pre-cum dripped onto my navel, shoving my arm out to frantically search for the petroleum jelly tub. When I found it, I scooped some up and reached down to slide my slick fist over Edin’s cock, making it nice and slippery. I gave my own dick a couple of easy pumps with what was left on my hand, shuddering at the feel.

“Hunter,” Edin rasped out, chest heaving as he watched me. He wrapped his huge arms around my thighs, elbows resting in the crooks of my knees,

and jacked my legs up so I was spread obscenely wide, ass tilted up. I flushed, heart going nuts even as my cock jumped against my belly.

But when Edin shifted his hips and I felt that hot, wide cockhead pushing gently against my hole, my heart clenched up. Shit, it was so big. “Hold on, scratch,” I said, voice strained.

Edin stopped immediately, his grip around my thighs loosening. “What’s wrong, josdo? Did I hurt you?”

He sounded so worried that my chest went tight. I shook my head quickly, sitting up and kissing him. “No, no. I just—Let’s swap places. I think it’ll be easier like this.” I shot him a brief smirk as I shifted us round on the bed. “It’s been a long time since I’ve done this, and you’re not exactly small.”

Edin chuckled, settling himself back against the headboard, sitting up. I had another moment of insecurity about my stump as I threw my left leg over his hips to straddle him, but again, Edin didn’t even look at it. His big eyes were roaming over my chest and stomach.

He growled out a low sound. “I love your body.”

Pleasure coursed through me, making my flush spread down my neck. I wanted to puff up my chest with pride. “Yeah?” I rasped, because I was shameless and wanted to hear more.

“Yes.” Edin gripped my hips with restless fingers, then slid those big hands up my sides and back down again, making me shiver. “You’re so big and strong.” He shot me a sly look, fangs peeking out as he grinned wickedly. “You can take all of me, and I don’t think I’ll have to be gentle. Will I?”

Hot anticipation rushed through me, stiffening my dick even more until it was almost painful. “Not a fan of gentle, scratch.” I leaned forward and kissed him, slicking my tongue into his mouth. “You be as rough as you want,” I murmured against his lips, then leaned back. “Once I’ve got used to you, that is.”

Edin chuckled, hands roaming over my thighs. I tensed up when his hand brushed down past the back of my left knee, his pinky finger briefly trailing over the curve of my stump. But he didn’t even seem to notice; his hand was already moving back up, and his hips bucked impatiently beneath me.

I huffed out a short laugh. “Alright, give me a minute.”

I sat up on my knees and reached back to grip Edin's cock, lining it up. God, it was huge. My heart was racing as I breathed out, bearing down. Pressure increased, and sweat beaded on my hairline as I clenched my teeth.

In a sudden rush, Edin's cockhead sank inside, and my entire body seized up from the sharp flare. "Shit," I gritted out, grabbing Edin's shoulders and holding on tight, fingers restlessly clenching against hot, smooth muscle.

He shuddered even as he made a low, sympathetic sound and smoothed his hands up and down my sides, keeping his hips completely still. "I'm sorry, josdo. Do you want to stop?"

"No," I grunted immediately, trying to breathe through it. "Just give me a minute."

The sharp pain was starting to fade, but everything still felt too full and tight as I carefully lowered myself another inch. "Jesus, Edin," I gritted out.

He chuckled, jostling his cock inside me and making me inhale a sharp breath. I sank down another inch, shivering from the pain-pleasure sensations as Edin snarled. But when I lifted my hips, preparing to sink back down a little deeper, a rush of pure pleasure made my stomach lurch. I exhaled hard, doing it again. And again.

Soon, his cock was fully seated inside me. I shuddered hard, feeling impossibly full. Stretched so wide. I could feel myself clenching the base of his shaft. Edin moaned out a low sound, fingers shifting against my hips.

"How does it feel, josdo?" he asked me, his voice rumbling through my chest and down into my belly.

I'd softened a little from the pain, but my dick started hardening again between us. "Big," I said in a blunt tone, my voice tight and gravelly.

Edin laughed and slid his hands round to splay them over my ass, tugging me closer so he could kiss me. I grunted, pleasure jolting through me, and wrapped my arms around his neck as the kiss got hotter and wetter. It distracted me from the last of the pain, and after a while my body started moving instinctively, hips rising and falling to slide his cock in and out of me.

"Oh, fuck," I rasped against his mouth when my limbs turned to jelly. My thighs were already shaking from the effort, because I had no left foot to brace against. As if he could somehow tell, Edin readjusted his grip on my ass, dropping his hands a little lower, and took some of my weight, helping to adjust my balance as I moved.

It made my chest squeeze tight even as I started fucking myself on his cock faster. “Goddamn,” I panted against his mouth. “You’re a big fucker, but shit it feels good.”

Edin chuckled, the sound strained. “You knew you’d like my big cock, josdo. You wanted it the moment you saw it.”

I kissed him hard so I wouldn’t have to admit to it, but it just made Edin laugh again against my lips. I tightened my arms around his neck, thrusting my tongue into his mouth, moaning as my stiff, dripping cock slid against Edin’s rock-hard abs between our bodies.

I was sweating from the effort. Soon I was frantic, my movements over Edin jerky, my mouth feverish and desperate as I kissed him. But I couldn’t stop, and Edin was grunting with pleasure into my mouth, kissing me back just as hard, fingers digging into my ass and encouraging me to move even faster.

When Edin shifted his hips underneath me, rising to meet every thrust, his cock slid firmly over my prostate and sent shockwaves of pleasure pulsing through me. I almost choked on a gasp, finally having to break our kiss as my eyes rolled back in my skull. “Oh fuck.”

“Mm.” Edin made a low sound of pleasure and nipped my chin.

“Unnngh, fuck yes,” I gritted out, breathing hard and fast, slamming my hips down now to chase that feeling. “I’m gonna come, Edin.” My voice was gravelly, almost guttural, but there was an edge of desperation there that I’d never heard in myself before.

Edin just kissed me hard, groaning low into my mouth. My arms were still wrapped around his neck, but I had the sudden urge to hold Edin closer, so I clenched fistfuls of his hair as I panted, sucking on his tongue. Then I reached for his horns and grabbed them close to the base, holding on tight. Edin’s cock jerked hard inside me as he grunted, shuddering.

The feel of it made everything inside me tighten up. “Edin.” I bit down on his lower lip, then sucked on it, then shoved my tongue back into his mouth. “Mmm,” I moaned, voice muffled, as my cock shot harder than steel between us and my nuts wrenched up.

A big hand grabbed my cock and slid up and down. I yelled out a strained sound into Edin’s mouth and started to come almost immediately, pleasure exploding from deep inside. My dick pulsed in his grip, my entire body shaking as cum pumped up between us, covering Edin’s chest. He growled out the most inhuman sound I’d ever heard him make and crushed

me to him as his cock jerked inside me. I was still clenching up around him, so I felt every kick as he came.

I was trembling, panting against his mouth as everything eased off. I shuddered when Edin’s hand let go of my sensitive cock. I slowly eased my hips up until his cock slid out of me, both of us groaning at the feel. I winced as I clenched instinctively.

I knew I’d be feeling that tomorrow, especially if we were in for another long day of walking. But I didn’t regret it for even a second.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Are you alright, josdo?” Edin asked me, thumbs massaging the front of my hips as we caught our breath.

I nodded, my heart still pounding. “All good. That was… Jesus.” I let out a breathless chuckle, and saw Edin’s lips curve up into a grin in the weak moonlight.

“Mm.” He leaned forward and pulled me into a hot kiss, though it was softer and less urgent than the others we’d just shared. “You were so hot and tight around my cock. Perfect.”

My face got warm despite what we’d just done. “I, uh… thanks.”

Edin chuckled. He patted my hip once, and I reluctantly slid off his lap to slump on the bed beside him, still trying to regulate my breathing. “Gimme a minute and I’ll go clean up,” I said, already wanting to sink down onto the bed and fall asleep.

Edin grunted an affirmative, sitting up and stretching out his big body. “Want your prosthetic, josdo?” He asked it so casually that I didn’t even bristle, boneless after that incredible fuck.

I was too tired to sort my prosthetic out. I blamed post-orgasmic brain fog on what I said next. “Can you just help me to the bathroom so I don’t have to put it on?”

Edin nodded and waited patiently as I scooted to the edge of the bed and stood up. I could get around fairly easily on my own without my prosthetic, but I was still way too self-conscious to hop to the bathroom in front of Edin. Much like that first day, when I’d pushed myself too far, he supported me as we made our way to the bathroom. We both cleaned up quickly, then he helped me back into bed.

Even though I was exhausted, I felt wired. I was insanely aware of Edin’s big, hot body beside me in the bed, even after what we’d just done. I still wanted to… touch him. Be near him. Feel his smooth skin against mine.

“I will be sad when you leave, josdo,” Edin eventually said into the darkness, his voice rumbling through the mattress and into my bones.

My throat went tight. Fuck. Why that? Why did he have to say that? “I…” My voice shook. “I’ll be sad to leave you too, scratch,” I got out

hoarsely.

His head turned on the pillow to look at me, big eyes gleaming in the moonlight. “Will we be able to meet up? To see each other again?”

I swallowed. “I don’t know if it’ll be possible, scratch.” My voice was too thick.

Edin’s brow furrowed, and after another silent moment of gazing back at me, he exhaled and turned his head to look back up at the ceiling. Even though I couldn’t see it in the dark, my eyes dropped to that spot underneath his jaw, where I now knew the brand was.

I wanted to reach out and touch him. “What happened when the military caught you?” I asked, voice low in the still quietness of the room. “Can’t imagine anyone getting the jump on you, scratch.”

Edin huffed out a little chuckle, but it fell flat. “It was back when the military was still utilising rudimentary methods to capture us. I came across a myrm in a trap.” He paused. “It is like a big, furry worm.”

I’d seen one of those before. Edin was right—they were like huge worms covered in dark hair, except they did have six small legs that they scuttled on like a huge bug. They were horse-sized, and their faces were frighteningly blank at the end of their long, curving necks. Just a wide slit for a mouth and two tiny black holes for eyes.

They were hideous, and insanely creepy. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to approach even a trapped one to free it, if I wanted to. But apparently it didn’t bother Edin.

“I was getting it free when they shot me with something. Tranquilisers, I think.” He chuckled once. “It took quite a lot of them to take me down.”

“I’ll bet.” I watched at him in the dark, facing him on my side.

“I woke up in one of those cells and…” He shrugged, as if the whole thing didn’t even matter.

“How long were you in there before you got free?”

Edin shrugged again but I saw his brow furrow, his expression going distant and uncomfortable. Like he didn’t want to remember. My heart clenched up. “I don’t know. Not long, I think? But it felt long. They—” He stopped.

My stomach knotted up. “They what.”

Edin looked over at me, then away again just as fast. “They were trying to work out what was most… effective on us. What worked the quickest to break our spirits and make us submissive. So they… did a lot of things.”

I barely suppressed the animal noise that wanted to rumble up from my throat, my hands clenching into shaking fists. Torture. They tortured him.

And I'd been in the military long enough to see the signs of trauma in a person. I'd seen it in Danny, once he'd opened up about it. And I could see it in Edin. In the way he'd gone stiff beside me, jaw clenched and brow furrowed even as his eyes became glazed and distant. Blank.

An overwhelming rush of anger boiled through me. They'd tortured Edin to see if they could control him. This kind, selfless, gentle monster. He looked scary and dangerous, like a demon, but he was… good. Wyn was right. Edin was *good*.

But that hadn't stopped the military from trying to make him their weapon. And it hadn't stopped me from pulling him into my unrelenting quest to get Charlie back.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, finally reaching out and resting my hand on his ribs. I could feel his smooth, unblemished skin beneath my fingers. Skin that didn't scar, no matter how badly it was injured. Skin that hid all that pain, making it so easy for selfish pricks like me to ignore.

I was sorry he'd been hurt by the military. By humans. But I was a million times sorrier that he'd been hurt because of me. I was no better than the rest of them.

No—in fact, I was worse. Because I hadn't even *considered* Edin's pain in all this. I hadn't even bothered sparing a single fucking thought to the fact that he might get hurt. I'd made so many assumptions, and deliberately ignored so much, because he wasn't human. Because it had been easy to.

Edin blinked hard at the ceiling, then his features smoothed out. I could see him forcing the pain back, hiding it away again. He turned onto his side to face me and gave me a smile, fang peeking out.

"Don't be, josdo. It wasn't you." He let out his familiar little dismissive sound, but now I could see it for what it was. "It was so long ago. I can barely remember."

Lies. I could see it in his eyes, even in the darkness. But I decided not to call him out on it. I didn't want to make him hurt any worse. Instead, I reached up and ran my thumb back and forth over his chin. Edin practically purred, lids going heavy. It made my lip quirk. "You like that?"

"Mm." Edin nuzzled my palm when I cupped the side of his face, making my chest go tight. "You smell so good, josdo."

I smiled. “I do, huh?” I remembered what he’d said about the kolebs back when we’d met. “What do I smell like? Hopefully not dirt and rotting fruit.”

I felt Edin’s lips curve into a grin against my palm. “You smell like… I don’t know. It’s hard to explain. Normally I can, but…” He shook his head and pressed his nose against my pulse point on my inner wrist. My heart sped up, goosebumps prickling down my arms at the brush of his nose against the sensitive, fragile skin. “Just… comforting. Like a nice memory.” His eyes flashed open, gleaming in the moonlight as he smirked at me. “And like sex.”

I coughed out a laugh, even though my heart was still pounding. “Shocker.”

Edin grinned at me, then let out a little sigh as he rested his cheek in my hand again, watching me silently. After a minute, he reached out and let his fingers dance lazily over my chest, making my skin prickle. “So Wyn told you I am the last isdernuc, did he?”

Isdernuc. That must be Edin’s species. I nodded. “Yeah, he… Yes.”

Edin chuckled. “Such a drama queen.”

I choked out an incredulous sound, wondering how the Soul Eater would react to being called that. I imagined only Edin would ever get away with it.

“Do you… want to talk about it or…?” I asked tentatively. I didn’t want to make him relive any more painful memories if he didn’t want to.

Edin watched me carefully. “Do you want to hear it?” His tone was mildly surprised, which made me feel like complete shit.

“Yes.” I stroked my thumb over his cheek. My hand was pressed between the pillow and his head, so I couldn’t move it too much. “I want to know about *you*, scratch. I…” I shook my head, throat tight. “I’m sorry I’ve been such a self-obsessed asshole.”

Edin chuckled. “You haven’t been obsessed with yourself. You’ve been obsessed with getting Charlie back.”

“Still.” I cleared my throat. “I’ve been selfish. And a shitty travelling companion. I’m sorry, scratch. I mean it.” I did. I’d never meant anything more.

I saw Edin’s throat bob a second before he lifted his head and lunged forward to kiss me hard. I grunted, then chuckled against his mouth, returning it. When Edin growled against my mouth, softening his lips and dipping his tongue inside, I couldn’t help but shiver hotly.

I shook my head, though, reluctantly breaking the kiss. “Don’t distract me.” I pinched his chin lightly. “I want to hear it.”

“Fine, fine.” He let out a big, dramatic sigh, but then settled back on the pillow. “It is not some… grand exciting story, I’m afraid.” His fingers returned to my chest, playing absentmindedly with the short hair there. “Wyn and I are… relics from another time in our world. You have species here that die out, yes?”

I nodded.

“We have that too. Creatures evolve, or can’t adapt to their changing environment. Or they are wiped out by a greater predator. Wyn and I are among some of the last remaining monsters from a previous age. There aren’t many of his kind left at all. And none of my kind, except me. Most of the monsters you come across now, while still old compared with humans, are much younger. Much newer.” He chuckled.

“Is that why some monster species eat or drink or sleep, and you don’t need to?” I asked.

Edin nodded. “Partly, yes. Creatures from our time, we absorbed energy and nutrients in different ways. And when you reach a certain age, you stop needing anything.”

“But, I mean, even when you’re injured?” I asked. “Surely your body uses insane amounts of energy regenerating limbs or… or like Wyn’s head injury.”

Edin nodded. “Yes, but it is like our bodies are… self-sufficient now.” He chuckled. “It is not something I can really explain, Hunter. Like how I can sense Wyn close by. It just… is.”

“Yeah.” I’d come to learn that some things which had once seemed impossible definitely weren’t. And there was no point arguing over it. “But, so… what happened to the rest of your… kind?”

Edin exhaled. “We were already very small in numbers by the time it happened. Not many of us left. Just a single pack, and I was the youngest, but there was another just a few years older than me. Irick. He was hot-headed and reckless, trying to prove himself an adult worthy of something. It was just sheer luck that I had left our camp that morning to collect something in the forest for my mother, because a rycke got too close and Irick tried to get it to leave.” His voice had turned grim. “Even though everyone knows better than to do that.”

“What’s a rycke?” I asked.

“A type of monster that is… unfathomably powerful.” Edin shook his head, lips curving into a humourless smile. “They are a dichotomy of unlimited violent rage and a peaceful, gentle nature. They do not like hurting anything, but when they are pushed to their limit, they are… unstoppable. Feared by all.” Edin paused and lifted his eyes from where they’d been watching his hand on my chest. “They had one, you know. In the base.”

My stomach lurched. “Really?”

Edin nodded. “Yes. The first specimen they caught.”

“Why didn’t it attack them? Surely if it was threatened or captured it would… go crazy?”

“It depends on the rycke. Their temperament. Their nature. They are protective more than they are self-preservative, if that makes sense. A rycke may be able to withstand an immense amount of pain itself, but the moment it sees something it cares about being hurt…”

“I see.” I had a sudden thought. “Wait, was the rycke in the base the same one who… that killed your pack?”

Edin shook his head. “They do not live that long. Thankfully. They gain strength with age. If they lived as long as Wyn or me, none of us would be here.” He chuckled despite the ominous words.

“Are there a lot of them?” I asked, feeling sick at the thought.

Edin shook his head again. “They are very rare. The military had no idea they’d captured something so dangerous, or unique. They tortured it as much as they tortured me, but it never tried to hurt them.” He exhaled, gaze going distant. “I wonder where it is now the base is gone.”

I didn’t really want to think about it. I remembered the way the back of my neck had crawled at the feel of inhuman eyes on me when Charlie and I looked around the first floor of the Nebraska base. I shuddered. “So a rycke… killed the rest of your pack.”

“Yes. I got back not long after and found them. The rycke was gone by then. But I could smell it still. Irick had managed to hurt it, I think, because its blood was everywhere, mixed with…” He stopped. “It was… brutal.”

Fuck, I couldn’t bear to even imagine it. So that meant he’d found his mother… his family… friends… “God, I’m sorry, Edin.”

He shook his head, but the movement was too sharp. “It’s fine, josdo.” He smiled at me. It didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Shall we sleep? You must be tired. I wore you out again, hmm?”

It would have been so easy to follow his lead. To shake off the heaviness and push it away to focus on the easy shit again. But I didn't want to. I didn't want just surface-level with Edin. I couldn't go back to it now.

Instead, I closed the small gap between us and kissed him hard, curling my fingers in his hair. When we finally broke apart, I rested my forehead against his. "I want you to keep telling me, Edin. I want to know you. Everything about you, before we… before I have to go." I swallowed. "Okay?"

Edin was silent for a long moment, but eventually he nodded. "I want to know you too," he said, deep voice quiet. So I nodded back and closed my eyes, refusing to let go of him until I fell asleep.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

My stomach was shaky as we set off the next morning. I didn't know if it was from not getting enough sleep, or if it was the sachet of instant coffee that had been in the MRE Danny had given me for breakfast. I hadn't had coffee in weeks before that first one the day before, and the caffeine was definitely making me jittery.

Although, that might have also had something to do with the fact that I knew I had to tell Edin my plan. And I knew he wouldn't like it.

I'd have to talk to him about it soon, though, so that we'd have enough time to make a proper plan together before we got to wherever the kolebs were taking Charlie to fight. But for now, I was happy to just walk alongside him, my arm brushing against his hot skin every now and then. I felt different with him this morning. Looser. Like we were… closer. Which, no shit, we kind of were. We'd fucked. I'd bottomed for him. Normally the sex I had—which was very infrequent—was meaningless. Nothing more than scratching an itch. But with Edin, it was… It definitely wasn't meaningless.

I just couldn't let myself think too hard about it, because what would be the point? We'd rescue Charlie, and then Charlie and I would go. Back to the military. And I'd probably never see Edin again. I had to *hope* I never saw him again, because the thought of the military coming across him sent tendrils of pure, stark fear shooting down my spine. I didn't want to think about what they'd do to him. Again.

I wasn't sure when I'd started thinking of the military as 'they' and not 'we'. I felt detached from it out here, in the company of monsters and a person who the military had deemed a deserter. Technically, right now, I wasn't really military—or at least, I wasn't acting on military orders. I was sure when we got Charlie and he and I headed back to the Tennessee base, everything would go back to feeling like it used to.

Even though I couldn't stop thinking about Edin being captured and tortured. And Danny. And, hell, even Wyn. The thought of returning to spying on monster nests or raider camps for the military made me feel sick to my stomach.

I shook the thoughts away and forced myself to focus on the present. Well, more like the very near future. Specifically, what we were going to do when we got to this underground fighting place. I was just gearing myself up to tell Edin my idea when movement on the horizon caught my eye.

We all stopped dead at the same moment, staring at the RV as it got closer. It was a huge motorhome, and had probably once looked decent, but its silver paint job was faded and spattered with mud now.

It also wasn't running. Its engine wasn't on. Instead, it was being pulled by two big monsters who were each about the size of a big car themselves. They had pale skin the colour of sand that looked wrinkled and hairless. Their faces were droopy with sagging features, and three long curving horns protruded from the tops of their bald heads. They were moving on all fours, and their arms were much longer than their legs, which meant they walked almost like gorillas. They'd been rigged up to the front of the vehicle with harnesses and chains, slowly pulling it behind them.

A third monster was walking alongside the RV, easily able to keep up with the slow pace of the lumbering beasts pulling it. This one was bipedal. Humanoid like Wyn and Edin, and probably almost as tall as Edin, though it was hard to tell from this distance. Its skin looked grey and mottled, its build masculine, with its bare chest on display apart from a black harness over its shoulders that connected the creature to the side of the moving vehicle by a heavy chain. At its side, it dragged along a huge war hammer that left a deep furrow in the ground in its wake.

It also seemed to have some kind of… contraption on its head. As the unsettling convoy got closer, I could tell that it was some kind of cage, encasing the monster's head. Unease slithered through my gut. I eyed that gigantic weapon that looked too heavy for even the monster to lift.

"What the fuck," I muttered, tensing up when the slow-moving procession got closer. It wasn't coming towards us, but there was no way they hadn't seen us.

Who was in that RV?

I jumped when Edin's deep, rumbling voice boomed out from beside me. He was calling something out to the weird convoy, in a language that was entirely foreign to my ears. Deep and musical, the words tumbling out in an endless stream with no pauses. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up, like I was hearing something that was too… powerful? Foreboding? I couldn't even be sure.

The tall creature walking alongside the vehicle stopped for a second. I eyed the chain that connected it to the RV, noting that the monster wouldn't be able to stay still for long. Even though I couldn't see its face through the cage, I sensed it was watching Edin. Eventually, the creature simply shook its head and carried on walking again.

There was a pause, then Edin called something out in that same alien language. But this time the creature didn't react at all, and within a few minutes the procession was past us, heading south towards the direction we'd come from.

"What was that?" I said to no one in particular as we slowly started moving again.

"I don't know who could be in the vehicle, but that was an aytorin walking alongside it," Edin said. I saw his jaw clench. "Chained to it."

"The one you spoke to?" Danny asked, and Edin nodded.

"I asked him where they were going. Who was in the vehicle." Edin frowned, and I saw him glance at Wyn. "Have you seen that before, Wyn?"

The Soul Eater shook his head, slinging his arm around Danny's neck and pulling him close in a protective gesture that hinted at his unease. "No. That was strange. Who has managed to chain up an aytorin?"

"And put a cage around its head," Edin added, voice grim.

"So that cage isn't… normal for that kind of monster, then?" I asked.

"No." Edin frowned at the ground as we walked, reaching up and rubbing his broken horn in an absentminded gesture that made my throat hurt. "I asked him if he needed help."

"And he didn't answer," I finished cautiously. Edin shook his head, brow still furrowed.

I exhaled, then reached out and briefly rubbed his arm. "You can't help everyone, scratch." Even though I knew he probably would if he could. "What's an aytorin?" I asked, mainly to distract him.

We started moving again. "They are an old race," Edin said, tone somewhat distracted, his mind no doubt still with the strange convoy. "Keep to themselves, normally. There's not too many of them."

"If someone has managed to capture one like that, they knew his name," Wyn added.

"His name?" Danny asked, threading his fingers through the Soul Eater's as they walked.

Wyn nodded. “They speak an ancient language that holds power. If you know an aytorin’s true name, you can control it.”

My first instinct was to scoff and say that was bullshit, but I forced myself not to, trying to be more open-minded. Still, I couldn’t stop myself from commenting, “That sounds like a fairytale.”

“Yeah!” Danny exclaimed straight away. “I remember my momma reading me these stories about fairies when I was a kid. If you found out a fairy’s real name, you could control it.”

“Mm.” Edin made his familiar little sound. “Maybe some truth bled over from our world into yours even back then.” He frowned. “I don’t like leaving him. It feels wrong. And the borolesh pulling the vehicle—they were chained up too. They are gentle creatures. It’s not right to force them to—”

I reached over and squeezed his hand briefly. “You can’t save everyone, scratch. There’ll always be shitty people who do terrible things.” I gestured vaguely behind us, where the RV had disappeared on the horizon. “And if whoever was in there has methods of capturing monsters like that, it probably wouldn’t be safe to just barrel in. Right?”

Edin exhaled hard. “Yes.”

There was a moment of silence as we walked. I could tell Edin was still stewing over the aytorin, his dark brows pulled into a frown.

Eventually, the Soul Eater spoke. “The human is right, Edin. You cannot help everyone. And we can’t risk falling too far behind the koleb group, if you still want to save the other one.”

I wanted to roll my eyes. I was pretty sure Wyn was fully aware of both my *and* Charlie’s names by now. I was guessing he still wanted to keep me very conscious of how little he thought of or trusted me by referring to me only as ‘human’.

At least his words made Edin give a little shake of his head as he let out a breath. “Yes. You’re right.” He shot me a small smile. “Charlie is more important.”

My chest went tight at his words. I squeezed his hand once more before letting go.

“Maybe you’ll come across them again after we’ve gotten Charlie, Edin,” Danny offered. “You tend to travel a lot. You never know.”

You tend to travel a lot. My stomach roiled. I thought about what Wyn had said the day before. About what Edin had told me. He’d been on his

own for so long. I pictured Edin walking alone for miles across the Wastes. Just walking. That was what he'd been doing when he found me in that sinkhole.

I hated it. I hated the thought of it. Did he get lonely? I imagined he surely would. He was a sociable creature. He liked company—even mine, and I was a surly asshole. My heart ached at the thought. I didn't want him to be on his own anymore. I could barely stand the thought of it, my chest going tight, my throat closing up, making me swallow convulsively.

But what the fuck was I supposed to do? I couldn't just… not go back to the military. It seemed unthinkable. I would just, what, live out here in the Wastes, with Edin? Forever? I had no idea if Edin even *wanted* that. And what about Charlie? He wouldn't want to do that. Could I really leave him? And if I did, would the military come after me? Would they do to me what they'd done to Danny, if they found me?

Would they torture Edin again?

My head started throbbing, and I forced myself to shove all the thoughts away. First, we had to get Charlie back. Then I'd deal with the rest. I couldn't get distracted.

Beside me, Edin let out a sigh that made me feel even worse. "Yes," he said, shooting a brief smile at Danny. Another that didn't quite meet his eyes. His gaze flickered to me and away just as fast, but I saw the sadness in it. "Maybe I will."

My throat tightened, words crowding it, threatening to burst free. Dumb, reckless, impulsive words that I didn't know if I'd regret later. Like *I'll come with you. I'll help you free those monsters. I'll stay with you.*

I stayed silent, walking beside Edin. Eventually Danny started talking about something else, moving the conversation away from the weird RV convoy, his tone easy as he teased Wyn. But I remained tense and silent, and I could sense Edin's sombre mood beside me. I wanted to comfort him. To promise him… something. But I couldn't. It wouldn't be fair. I didn't know if I could keep any promises. If I'd even want to.

Snap out of it, Hatton, I thought fiercely to myself. *You're just feeling sentimental because you fucked. You can't live out in the Wastes with a monster for the rest of your life. It's ridiculous.*

But the sensible voice in my head just put me in an even shittier mood.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The kolebs and behamots reached their destination two days later.

It was still mostly dark by the time we caught up with them, but approaching dawn, the horizon turning murky. I could make out the outline of a big building looming up ahead, small pockets of flickering orange surrounding it. A cacophony of sounds reached our ears—grunts and shouts and booming laugher; the occasional scream. It sent nervous confusion pounding through me.

We came to a stop on the highway in front of the sprawling structure, before tentatively making our way down the drive. “The fuck is this place?” I muttered.

“Looks like an old prison,” Danny said, his voice wary.

He was right. As we got closer, I could see big letters on the side of the building in the flickering orange light. The majority were long gone thanks to the elements, but what remained read ‘COR ECTIO L AND TRE TM NT’. The tattered remains of the US flag hung limply from the flag pole out front, dulled and ripped from years of harsh weather.

Around the sprawling building was a *sea* of monsters. It looked like some kind of nightmarish festival. Campfires lit up clusters of creatures like little beacons, some talking intently, others roasting small animals over the flames. Some were brawling, snarls and whooping laughter drifting over. Tents were dotted around sporadically, but it looked like the majority of the monsters would just sleep outside on the ground. If they had to sleep, that was.

I gaped at the sight in front of us. “Okay. I can maybe believe that the parasite thing has managed to fly under the military’s radar,” I began, voice tight, “but how the fuck are they not aware of *this?*”

“This is crazy,” Danny added in an uneasy voice. “Have you never seen this before, Wyn?”

The Soul Eater shook his head. “This place was deserted the last time I was up here. About eighteen months ago.”

Edin spoke up. “I was in this area just over a year ago and it was still empty then.”

Well, it certainly wasn’t empty now. It was *teeming*.

I swallowed. It would take us all night to try and find Charlie in this.

The thought made me pause. I squinted at the swarm of creatures in front of us, trying to spot a single human. I couldn't find any.

"Where are all the humans?" I said out loud, but kept my voice low.

"In there, probably." I turned in time to see Wyn jerk his hood towards the looming building of the former prison. "I imagine they take them in there before the fights."

I stared at the building, hands on my hips and a frown tugging at my eyebrows. "Okay, so I have to get in there." I turned to Edin. "I have to enter to fight, like we talked about."

We'd discussed this at length, and had quietly argued about it the night before as we'd camped out on the side of the highway. Edin was entirely against the plan.

He held his palms up. "Let's not rush, Hunter. Let's do what we agreed. Wyn can go in there and look around first. Maybe he will be able to get Charlie out easily."

I wanted to huff, but he was right. We'd agreed that Wyn would scope out the place—although we hadn't known it would be quite this large—in the first instance to see if there was an easy way to get Charlie, if maybe he wasn't being so closely guarded by the behamots anymore.

Now, it looked like he wasn't even with the koleb and behamot group anyway. There weren't any humans out here.

If Wyn couldn't grab Charlie, the plan was for Edin to enter me as his human fighter, so I could try and get close to Charlie and let him know we were here to get him out.

Wyn was nodding. "I will go in there and see where they are keeping the humans." He shrugged off his satchel and handed it to Danny. "I won't be long, sweet," he told him, smoothing a hand down Danny's arm. "Edin, I am trusting you with Danny while I'm gone."

Edin nodded beside me. "Of course," he said, shooting Danny a big grin.

Other monsters had noticed us, but were giving us a wide berth—I assumed because of the Soul Eater. The last couple of days of walking had also been particularly quiet, which made me assume just about everything and everyone avoided Wyn. I wondered if that meant the moment he was gone, they'd descend. I slowly pulled my shotgun from my back holster and rested it casually against my right thigh.

I hadn’t actually seen Wyn turn to his ‘smoke thing’, as Danny called it. So it took a moment for my brain to catch up when the Soul Eater vanished in a split-second and an undulous swirl of thick black smoke rose in his place. It looked like the smoke from a blown out candle, twisting and curling in the air.

And then it was gone, thinning into nothing as Wyn shot towards the prison building. I exhaled and resisted the impulse to pace, fingers twitching against the stock of my shotgun. I forced myself not to impatiently ask how long Wyn would be. He’d only been gone ten seconds.

Somehow, though, Edin knew what I was thinking. “He won’t be long, Hunter,” he said, his rumbling voice soothing some of the anxiety churning in my gut. His big hand rubbed my back. “We’re nearly there.”

I nodded and gave in to the urge to pace, keeping my steps to a short stretch in front of Danny and Edin, making sure not to stray any closer to the monsters roaming around us. At least none of them had approached.

When Wyn returned, he solidified beside Danny from a thin, twisting column of black smoke. I immediately stopped pacing and turned to stare at him. I resisted the impulse to blurt, *‘Well?´* knowing it would only get the Soul Eater’s back up.

He gave a little shrug. “They are all locked in the cells. I cannot carry a human through solid metal and concrete.”

“But you can just smash the door down, right?” Danny asked.

“I can. I think the guards would have something to say about it, though.”

“How many guards are there?” I asked, running through the list of variables in my head. Guards. Weapons. Cell doors. Other humans. The monsters out here. All things we needed to combat to get Charlie out.

“At least four. All human.”

“Should be easy for you to knock unconscious, then.” I thought for a second. “What weapons do they have?”

“Guns. But that won’t be a problem. I can disable them easily.” Wyn pointed at the satchel still slung over Danny’s shoulder with a black-fingered hand. “And I have rope. I can tie them up to stop them alerting anyone if they wake up before we have gotten Charlie.”

“Good thinking.” I immediately felt weird to have given the Soul Eater a compliment. Wasn’t like we were all buddy-buddy, even if we had formed an unspoken truce of sorts over the last couple of days. He seemed to find it uncomfortable, too, because I saw him shift awkwardly. “How many

humans are in there?" I asked quickly to move past the moment. "Roughly?"

Wyn's hood tilted. "Many. Dozens. Maybe a hundred."

Jesus. I could believe it, though, going by the sheer number of monsters surrounding the prison building.

"Okay." I placed my hands on my hips and tried to organise my thoughts, staring at the looming dark building in front of us. "So the guards can be disabled. That's good. Then you'll just need to get Charlie's cell door down. How long do you think that would take you? Do you think the sound would travel out here if you smashed down his door?"

"I cannot open just Charlie's cell." Wyn's voice was blunt. "I have no idea what Charlie looks like."

I froze. My stomach dropped. "Shit." I rubbed at my face roughly. "*Fuck*." How could I have been so fucking stupid to have not even *thought* of that?

I felt Edin's hand settle on the back of my neck a second later, his thumb smoothing down the side of my neck. "Calm, Hunter." His rumbling voice rolled through me, somehow soothing some of the tension already boiling up. "We will work it out. We knew it might not be easy, yes? We've known that all along."

I nodded, distracted as my brain frantically tried to come up with another solution. "What if you opened *all* the cells?"

"I suppose I could." Wyn's voice was sceptical.

"Wyn wouldn't have time to open all the cells," Edin said. "Even with the guards disabled, it is too risky. There is always the chance someone will come in before Wyn has got to Charlie's cell. Opening them all that way would take too long."

Fuck fuck fuck. Edin was right. It would take too long, and make too much noise, and the last thing we wanted was a flood of monsters pouring into the building before Wyn had even gotten to Charlie.

"What about a sneakier approach?" I blurted. "Unlocking the cells instead of smashing the doors down?"

"Perhaps." Wyn sounded doubtful. "Will the cells be easy to open?"

"They'll be electromechanical locks," Danny said. "They could be opening them all at once with the computer to save time, if it still works. If the computer isn't working, which is more likely, they're probably just

using the deadbolts. I doubt you'd have to go searching for a set of jailer's keys or anything like that."

When I stared at him, he shrugged. "They used the same kind of locks at the base," he said quietly. "Just on a much bigger scale."

I nodded quickly to move on, sensing his discomfort. "Yeah. I guess there's a slim chance the computer could still be working? I don't know." I knew jack shit about old computers.

Danny made a noise from under his headgear. "If the guards are human, that means it could be a human running things round here," he said, voice dark.

I had to nod. Wasn't like humans didn't have a history of exploiting other humans in unimaginable ways. "Or a human and monster working together? Who knows."

Wyn spoke up. "If they are using the computer, I could watch them to work it out." He paused. "But I don't think opening all the cells is a good idea. It could easily devolve into chaos. If the humans started pouring out of that building, I can't imagine all these monsters will just sit here watching it happen, especially if they see the humans as their property or an investment. There is a risk you wouldn't be able to find Charlie in the crowd before he got hurt. Or even find him at all before someone else got to him," he added darkly.

Something like despair started rising like a tidal wave inside me. For a second, it had seemed so… *attainable.* But Wyn was right. There were too many variables. Too many risks. If he unlocked all the cells, the humans would start scrambling to escape immediately. They could be discovered before Wyn had even gotten to all the cells—to Charlie.

The safest, cleanest way to do this was to get in there quietly, unlock only Charlie's cell, and get out. But like Wyn had said, he had no idea what Charlie looked like. And I had no way of showing him. Wasn't like I kept a picture of him on me, for fuck's sake.

I straightened and took a breath, turning to face Edin. "Okay, you have to enter me in the…" I waved a hand behind me at the prison, "whatever the fuck this is. I'll go in there and find Charlie—find out what cell he's being held in. I'll somehow get that information to you guys. Then Wyn comes in, disables the guards and unlocks mine and Charlie's cells. Right?"

Edin stared back at me, brows drawn low, his right fang worrying his lower lip in an endearingly anxious expression. It made me want to kiss

him.

“It could work,” Wyn said, distorted voice only a little uncertain. He smoothed his black-tipped thumb over Danny’s shoulder. “But how are you going to tell me your cell numbers? We would still have to move quickly.”

I thought for a second, trying to come up with an answer fast. “The cell doors will have windows and meal hatches,” I said. “How long would it take you to find my cell once I’m in? You can get in through the hatch. I mean, assuming they put me in a cell and don’t just send me out to fight straight away.” Apprehension trickled through me at the thought. I’d prefer not to fight, but I’d do it if I had to.

“Not long.” Wyn’s hood dipped in a nod. “That could work.”

“We could have Charlie out tonight,” Danny added. “Neither of you would have to fight at all.”

Renewed determination flooded through me. I nodded at him and shrugged off my backpack and shotgun holster. I took off my hat and mask and stuffed them in my backpack before handing it to Edin, and the gun to Danny. I figured he’d be the one who might need to use it.

I turned to Edin, who was clutching the straps of my bag tight in one big fist. “You have to sign me up, scratch.”

He was still frowning, brows pulled low. “I don’t like this,” he grumbled, fangs flashing.

“We talked about this,” I said. I could feel my temper rising already, impatient to get in there. I tried to tamp it back. He was just worried about me. “A few hours, and this will all be over. We’ll have Charlie.”

And Edin won’t have any more reason to stay with me.

My gut tightened painfully at the thought. Edin knew Charlie and I would be heading back to the military, even if it wasn’t straight away. So why would he stick around? He’d said, all the way back in Kentucky, that he would help get Charlie back. Once that was done, would he leave?

I let out a shaky breath but forced the thoughts away, yet again. I had to focus on what was happening right in front of me. Not what could happen later. That helped no one—least of all Charlie.

I tried giving Edin a small smile. “I’ll be good, scratch. Even if I *do* have to fight.”

Edin huffed. “I know you will be good at fighting. I just don’t want you to have to *do* it.”

“Well, I might not,” I said quickly, then jerked my chin towards the prison building. “The sooner I get in there and find Charlie, the sooner we can be gone.” I took a step closer and briefly tangled my fingers with Edin’s. “I swear, I’ll be okay, scratch. I can do this.”

He exhaled a hard breath and nodded once, drawing my gaze to his snapped horn, renewing my determination even more. I was doing this. I wasn’t letting Edin do anything else that risked putting him at harm. It was *my* fucking turn to pull my weight.

“Come on.” I turned to Wyn and Danny, nodding at them. “Thanks again. For everything.” I looked directly at Wyn, into the black depths of his hood. “I’ll see you in there.”

His hood dipped in a nod, but he didn’t say anything.

“Good luck, Hunter,” Danny said, stepping forward to clap a hand on my shoulder. “Be safe. We’ll be waiting for you and Charlie.”

“Thanks.” I nodded down at the shotgun in his hands. “Don’t be afraid to use that if you need to. Shells are in my bag.”

I didn’t wait for Danny to answer, knowing he wouldn’t want to use it, but I wanted to make sure he knew he could if he had to. I turned back to Edin and tried to give him a reassuring smile. “Let’s do this, scratch.”

Edin huffed out an unhappy sound, but slung my backpack over his shoulder—it looked comically small against him—and reached out to cup the side of my neck for one brief, sweet moment. I felt his thumb stroke my earlobe before he dropped his hand again, and we started walking towards the building.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

To the right of the prison entrance, there was a table beneath a spotlight with a female-looking monster manning it. Her skin was yellowish-green and looked wet, like a fish out of water. She didn't have a structured face, just a lightbulb-shaped head that blended seamlessly into her wide body. Long, thick strands of something dark green that wasn't hair sprouted from the top of her head, and I could see the rope-like protrusions writhing, shifting against her sloping shoulders independently to her head movements, like they were alive themselves.

A brown, sack-like garment covered her vaguely feminine-looking shape. Her lips were thin, nose nothing more than two slitted nostrils on her flat face, and her eyes were long and thin, like she was squinting permanently.

I could see her watching us as we approached, but even to me, her monstrous features managed to somehow convey sheer boredom. "Entering a human to fight?" she asked in a bland tone when we reached the rickety old table that had been set up.

Edin nodded. I could feel the tension in his big body, and I wished I could reach over and touch him, smooth my hand down his side. But I couldn't.

"Have you entered a human fighter before?" she asked, grabbing a big notebook on the table and flicking through its wrinkled, yellowed pages to one that was half-blank and half covered in illegible alien scribbles. She had four arms, and they were long, each ending in three thick, tentacle-like fingers.

"No."

She waved a careless hand at a huge grid of six old whiteboards haphazardly secured to the side of the building, the plastic splitting around the big nails that had been hastily hammered into their corners. They were covered in little boxes with number sequences filling them, alongside arrows between boxes, and alien scribbles that hurt my brain to even try and decipher.

"This is what's on offer," the monster said. "What's being bartered by entrants if you beat their fighters."

“I can’t read all of that.” Edin sounded incredulous. “There are about fifty different languages on those boards.”

The monster shrugged. “Not my problem. You’ll be limited to putting your human up against the ones whose offers you *can* read, then. If you’re even that bothered about the stakes.” She eyed me in a predatory way. “Some of us don’t even care about winnings. We just like seeing humans fighting for their short little lives.”

“What kind of things are the monsters bartering?” I murmured to Edin, eyeing the board. The only things I could see written in a human language were the numbers in the boxes. I wondered what they meant.

He narrowed his gaze at the board, big eyes moving quickly over the scribbles. “I can’t read all the languages, but I can see… alcohol. Meat. Weapons.”

I clenched my hands into fists. Really? They were forcing humans to fight for this utter trivial *shit?* Shit they could probably scavenge or hunt for themselves, if they looked hard enough. It was infuriating.

I was trembling with rage. Edin sensed it and briefly gripped the back of my neck. “There are many other things, too. Some are bartering information. I can see someone offering to give directions to a secret entrance to one of the west coastal cities.”

What? The thought was utterly chilling. Monsters knew secret ways into the cities?

Edin continued, his deep voice grim. “Someone is offering slaves. There is also a…” He swallowed. “An offer for a night with another human they have captive.”

Jesus. I felt sick. I shook my head, silently telling Edin I was done hearing what these monsters were bartering for their fights’ outcomes. It was either too trivial to be anything but infuriating, or too horrific to consider.

The monster behind the table still looked bored. “Speak to the fightmaster to coordinate your human’s fights against those who are bartering what you want. Although she’ll probably be too busy with her lover now, and you don’t want to interrupt that. Best to wait ‘til this evening.”

She gestured at the board again, gaze flat and disinterested. She’d probably done this countless times. “The tougher the opponent, the better the prize. It’s recommended you start your human off against similarly-

classed humans before moving them on to the tough boys." She looked me over with an expression that was half interest, half distaste. "This is a big one, so you can probably skip straight to the tougher humans we've got here. Some have been here a while. Most don't last long."

I could sense Edin struggling to give an answer that was believable. "I want him to benefit me as much as he can, so I'm not going to put him up against a seasoned fighter straight away. Too risky."

The monster shrugged her sloping shoulders. "Whatever." She leaned down to fish a metal cuff out of a big plastic bin beside the table, yellowed with age. "Your human is now…" she glanced at the side of the cuff she'd picked up, "fighter eight-two-three." She picked up a pencil with her tentacle-like fingers and bent down to the notebook. "Name?"

We both hesitated. "Mine or his?" Edin asked.

She glanced up and rolled her eyes. "I just told you *his* new name." She jerked her chin at me before smiling widely at Edin. "What's *your* name, big boy?" she purred.

My shoulders went tight, anger spiking. *Big boy?*

"Edin." His voice was stiff.

"Mmm." The monster shot him another leery smile and bent back down to scribble in the notebook. "Take your human over there after this." She glanced up briefly to jerk her chin towards the prison entrance, which was being guarded by a tall monster. "All humans are kept in the cells inside. To keep them *safe*." She directed a big, rabid grin in my direction, lots of sharp teeth on display.

"Just before the fights, yes?" Edin asked.

She shook her head as she straightened up, holding the cuff. "No, at all times when they're not training or fighting. Besides, you've missed tonight's fights. They run most days from 6pm to 4am. But your human will probably have to fight tonight—the crowd loves fresh meat, so the fightmaster always puts new fighters in as soon as possible. Speak to the fightmaster if you want a say in who he goes up against. Otherwise she might pair him with someone who beats his brains in straight away and then you're shit out of luck." The monster shot me another unfriendly smile. "Wouldn't that be fun?"

I just about resisted baring my teeth back at her. Apprehension buzzed at the thought of having to fight tonight, but if the fights didn't start until the evening, that meant I would definitely have time to find Charlie, though. It

gave us plenty of time to tell Wyn our cell numbers and get the fuck out before *either* of us had to fight. Honestly, this was the ideal scenario.

My eyes drifted down to the numbered cuff in the monster's hands. I wondered what number Charlie was. I looked over at the board again, feeling ill. What were the kolebs and behamots were offering if he was beaten in a fight?

Edin had gone tense beside me. "If he has to be in a cell, then I will too. I'll stay in there with him." He jerked his chin towards the prison building. "I don't trust other humans not to try and damage him," he tacked on, trying to make his possessiveness a little more believable in the context of a monster using his human to fight for profit.

The monster shook her head. "No monsters in with the humans. You stay out here. If you want him to fight, those are the rules. We all respect them." She aimed what I assumed was supposed to be a sweet smile at Edin. "Without rules, these kinds of enterprising ventures in the Wastes are doomed to fail." I couldn't believe I was hearing a lecture on good business acumen from a monster. "And it really is safer for the merchandise. You don't want him out here, trust me. He could wander off while you're distracted and get torn apart—or worse—by a pack of bored, drunk creatures."

"I won't get distracted—"

"Those are the rules," she interrupted in a harder voice. "If you don't follow the rules, you don't get to participate."

"We'll follow the rules," I said quickly. "I'll go in there. I'll be fine," I added to Edin. *This is what we wanted, scratch!* I wanted to hiss, but obviously couldn't. I tried to convey it with my eyes instead.

I saw his jaw tick as he stared back at me for a long moment. Eventually he jerked his chin down in a brusque nod.

He faced the monster and held out his hand for the cuff, but she pulled it closer to her chest as she eyed Edin. "You're not entering yourself as well?" Her horizontal pupils narrowed with appreciation as she trailed them over Edin's form—so slowly that I started to bristle. "You'd do well, big boy."

Edin paused, then shot her a tight grin. Even though I knew he had to stay in character, it made me bristle more. "I'd rather let my human do the hard work."

I jumped when his big hand came down on the back of my neck. He squeezed once, and I knew he was telling me to stay calm.

It was hard though, when this monster douchebag was eyeing up Edin like he was grade-A beef. Right in fucking front of me.

"Well." She leaned forward over the table, one of her four arms reaching out to trail light, tentacle-like fingers up over Edin's shoulder. "If you find yourself bored waiting for your human to fight and want to be *distracted*, come and find me."

Edin just chuckled while furious heat flooded my face, my hands clenching into fists. "He doesn't get bored with me," I snapped. "Thanks, though."

As the monster raised a brow at me, Edin snorted out what sounded like a muffled laugh. "Well, you *certainly* have this one well-trained," she said, ignoring me in favour of addressing Edin again. "Might want to work on its manners, though. Especially around our kind." She finally looked at me properly, baring her teeth in some semblance of a smile. "We don't appreciate being spoken to like that, *human*."

"Yeah, well, I don't appreciate you trying to fuck him while I'm standing right here. Let's call it quits." I snatched the cuff out of her hands and stalked off, dragging Edin with me with a hand clamped around his wrist. Although, I was sure he came willingly. I doubted I'd be able to move him an inch, otherwise.

"I like you being jealous, josdo," Edin murmured low in my ear, making the back of my neck prickle with awareness.

I flushed with embarrassment. "She called you big boy," I grunted. "I was doing you a favour."

Edin rumbled out a low laugh and tugged on my arm to spin me round. The moment I faced him, he crowded me, forcing me backwards until he could cage me in against the side of the building. "Are you saying she's wrong? I think you know better than anyone else here how true that is."

More heat flooded my face, but I held his bold gaze, raising a brow. "And let's keep it that way, huh?"

Even as I said it, shame cut through the possessive jealousy riling me up. What was I doing? Trying to get Edin to commit to me or something? I was being a fucking idiot. I couldn't stay with him. I had to leave. I had no right to get jealous. No right to make Edin promise anything.

God, I was such an asshole.

I was already shaking my head, flustered, about to go back on my words. "I didn't—"

Edin stopped me with a firm grip on my chin, tapping my lower lip with his thumb. “I don’t want anyone else, Hunter,” he told me, his impossibly deep voice curling through my belly.

Pure, unadulterated pleasure shot through me. I wanted to reach out and grab him and force his body close to me. I wanted to kiss the shit out of him. Only the monsters milling around stopped me doing any of it. “Me neither.” I flushed. “I mean, I don’t either.”

Edin’s lips curved into that sly grin, his fang peeking out. “I still like you acting all possessive, though.” We both knew we had to move apart and keep walking to the prison entrance, but Edin leaned in closer, until his leather and wood scent filled my nose and I felt the base of his horn brush my temple. I shivered when his warm lips tickled my ear. “Once we’ve gotten Charlie back, I’m going to fuck you so hard you’ll forget your own name.” He leaned back and patted my chest once. “So don’t worry, josdo.” He grinned wolfishly at me. “I’ll be saving all my energy for that.”

“I…” I was tongue-tied, heat swimming through my body.

Before I could formulate a proper response, Edin’s face went serious and he leaned in closer again. “I don’t like this, Hunter,” he said, voice low and soft. “I wasn’t expecting to leave you so long—”

“I’ll be fine.” I reached out and briefly brushed my knuckles over his tense stomach to soothe him. “I can handle it. I promise. If anyone starts anything with me in there, I’ll be able to handle myself.”

Edin exhaled. “I know, but I still don’t like it. I don’t like the thought of you sleeping on your own in there, without me watching over you.”

My lips twitched. “You’re worried about me sleeping away from you when I might be fighting soon?”

Edin growled. “I don’t like *any* of it.”

God, I wanted to kiss him. “I swear, I’ll be fine, scratch. I just need to find out Charlie’s cell number and tell Wyn. Shit, I might not even have to fight at all if I can get to him quick enough.”

I took a breath. “Come on.” I shot Edin a small smile that was hopefully comforting, though I doubted it. “The sooner we do this, the sooner we can get away from this goddamn circus.”

Edin grabbed my wrist when I started to move, stopping me in my tracks. Big, dark purple eyes bored into mine, the reflection of a nearby campfire dancing in them. “Please be careful, Hunter,” he said. “I’ll be worrying for you.”

It felt like my heart melted, which was an entirely foreign sensation for me. I was filled with an overwhelming urge to crush this big purple monster against me. To hold him tight in my arms and not let go.

I refrained, but my fingers twitched with my desire to touch him. “Don’t worry. I’ll be careful. You’ve done so much, Edin. It’s my turn.”

Edin took a deep breath and nodded. Gently, he snapped the cuff closed around my wrist and locked it with the tiny key. With one last squeeze of his big fingers around my wrist, Edin dropped my hand and we carried on walking towards the entrance to the prison. The monster guarding it was tall and gangly, his limbs freakishly long with an extra joint and covered in coarse brown hair.

He eyed Edin dubiously. “You sure you want him to enter? Humans don’t last long in here, generally. Couple of weeks, a month tops, until they start going up against the really tough ones and become mincemeat.” I wondered if he meant that last part literally. The monster jerked his pointed chin towards where we’d been standing before. “You looked pretty *attached* to this one just now.”

Edin paused for a second, before letting out a booming laugh and shoving my head affectionately. “Not attached, just having fun with the human. They’re useful in many ways.”

I bristled but didn’t say anything, knowing Edin didn’t mean it. The monster guarding the door gave me a leering, creepy smirk. “Very true. And this is a big one. Bet it puts up a good fight.”

“Mm.” Edin made a non-committal sound and scrubbed a rough hand over my head. “In you go, human. Fight well for me.”

When he smacked my ass to get me moving, making me jump, I gritted my teeth and stayed silent. But as I stepped over the threshold of the prison, I glanced back over my shoulder and shot Edin a look that told him, in no uncertain terms, that he would be *very* sorry for spanking me in public.

The big purple monster just watched me, muscular arms folded over his chest, brows pulled low over his gleaming eyes. I could see the worry in them still. It just made me all the more determined to get this over with as cleanly and quickly as possible, so I could get back to him. So I could properly thank him for everything he’d done.

And if I *did* have to fight, I would. I’d fight well for Edin, just like he asked.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I wasn't shocked to see a human waiting for me inside to lead me into the bowels of the prison. Wyn had said the guards were human.

I *was* shocked to see the military-grade automatic assault rifle in their hands.

I looked around as they patted me down the moment the door slammed shut behind me, checking for hidden weapons. The lobby was brightly lit, its fluorescent lights humming. The front desk was rotting. Trash littered the dirty linoleum floor.

Once the guard was satisfied I wasn't hiding any weapons, they jerked their head to indicate I should get moving.

I schooled my features, but couldn't stop myself from nodding down at the rifle as I followed them. "Quite a weapon."

The person was wearing a scarf as a mask, everything from their neck to just beneath their eyes covered. When they glanced back at me, their eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Don't even think about it."

I held my hands up in placation, trying to come across as non-threatening as possible. "I wasn't. I just… Isn't that what soldiers use?"

"Don't know, don't care," they grunted. I was walking a step or two behind them—which was enough to tell me this person wasn't a soldier, because it was a dumbass move. If I hadn't been *trying* to get into this fucking place, I could have had that gun out of their hands in two seconds.

My stomach tightened as I considered it. I could knock this person out and take their gun. I eyed them, noting the thick, bulky bullet-proof vest over their clothes. It looked new. I could take it as well. Hell, I could swap our clothes and see how long I could get away pretending to *be* them. The mask covered most of their face.

If I did though, how would I control the other guards? Wyn said there were at least four in the cell block with the human fighters. They all had guns too. Could I bring myself to shoot four people who hadn't actually done anything to me? I tried to think of another solution. Maybe I could lock them up in a cell, but that still required me to disarm them first. How was I supposed to disarm four guards with assault rifles before at least one of them riddled me with bullets?

My hesitation was enough for the window of opportunity to pass. The guard suddenly swung around and pointed that gun right in my face. “I said, don’t even think about it,” they growled, voice deeper and angrier. “You think I haven’t been doing this long enough to know what you’re thinking, asshole?” They jerked their chin. “Get in front of me.”

I exhaled slowly and held my hands up as I brushed past them, ignoring the gun still pointing in my face. “Wasn’t thinking anything.”

“Yeah, sure,” they grunted. I gritted my teeth when the barrel of the gun poked me between the shoulder blades. I hoped they knew how to handle that weapon, because I would *not* be happy if they accidentally shot me in the fucking back before I even got to the cell block.

I noted every single locked door that the guard took me through and re-locked behind us, tallying them up and counting the seconds we spent walking in my head to try and work out how long it would take for us to clear the building. Worry bubbled like acid in my gut. So we *would* need to get the keys off a guard to get out, unless Wyn could quickly boot down all of these doors. The deeper into the prison I got, the more obstacles I realised we’d be facing to get back out.

A vein started throbbing in my temple.

When we reached the cell block where the fighters were being kept, I counted five guards, with the one walking behind me taking it up to six. They were standing around the cavernous room, some alert, others slumping back against a wall, their posture bored. They all carried the same weapon as the guard behind me, and they were all wearing the same thick bulletproof vests over their dark clothing.

The room was empty other than the guards. We’d entered on the ground floor, and there were bolted down tables and benches stretching across the main part of the room in front of us. Around the edges of the echoing spaces were metal staircases leading up to the railed walkways lining the cells. All the heavy cell doors were shut, and it was totally quiet.

Our boots were loud as the guard led me up a metal staircase. All the other guards watched, one leaning their elbows on the railing of the floor above us to stare down at me, their cold gaze over their black mask prickling the back of my neck. None of them spoke, and the silence was making me even more tense.

Where the fuck was Charlie? What cell was he in? I wondered what the guards would do if I just screamed out his name. Even if I did, though, it

wasn’t like I had supersonic hearing that would let me pick out exactly which cell his voice came from, if he called back.

Fuck. How was I supposed to tell Wyn which cell Charlie was in if I didn’t fucking know? My heart was racing as I frantically tried to think, stomping up the metal staircase as slowly as the guard would allow, trying to buy time.

When we reached the walkway, the guard poked me in the back again with his gun to get me to move faster. I gritted my teeth but stayed silent, and as our boots echoed on the metal grating under our feet, I realised I could hear faint sounds coming from the cells that we passed. Low murmurs. Sobs. Sounded like two people were fucking aggressively in one of them. Someone slammed their fist against a door and yelled something, voice angry and muffled.

The guard took me up two more sets of stairs to the top floor, which was quieter than the others. “Odd number of fighters, so you get a cell on your own tonight,” they told me. “Congratulations.”

I digested the information. So Charlie was in a cell with another fighter. Shit, that made things more complicated.

When the guard stopped outside a cell door and drew back the thick deadbolt to heave the heavy door open, I made a note to let Wyn know that they weren’t using the computer to lock the cells. Finally, something that would make this whole thing *less* complicated.

“Get in,” the guard grunted, shoving me in the back hard with their gun, making me wince as I jerked forward into the cell. It was cold and dark, especially after the guard slammed the cell door shut and I heard the deadbolt automatically slide into place, locking me in.

The room was small, with two ledges built into the wall for beds, the tattered remains of ancient mattresses still resting on top, brown and stained. The only other thing in the room was a toilet with a small sink above it.

I wrinkled my nose and booted the filthy mattress off one of the beds before sitting down on the cold steel ledge. I jumped back to my feet less than thirty seconds later, too restless to keep still. I paced the room, wondering how long Wyn would wait before coming to find me. At the thought, I crossed back to the door and peered out of the small window into the main part of the cell block. I couldn’t see much, and none of the guards were visible from my viewpoint.

Exhaling, I paced over to the window to outside, which sat beyond metal bars. It was some kind of safety glass, thick and distorted, but I could hear the rambunctious noises of monsters fucking and fighting and getting drunk in their makeshift campsite as the sun came up.

I didn't know how long I paced for until a change in air pressure in my cell made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I froze and turned to stare at the door, intense relief coursing through me when black, oily smoke poured sinuously through the small window.

A second later, the Soul Eater was standing in my cell, blackened fingers flexing by his sides.

"Hey," I whispered, taking a step forward. "I couldn't get Charlie's cell number. They were all in their cells already."

I braced, expecting the Soul Eater to chew me out for being an incompetent fool, but he didn't. We were still wary of each other, but he'd definitely grown less mistrustful of me over the last couple of days.

Wyn made a small noise of displeasure. "Of course. They were in their cells already when I came in. I should have thought of it."

"I guess we try again later?" I asked, unsure. "They'll have to let us out at some point."

Wyn's hood jerked in a nod. "Yes. I'll come back." There was a pause. "Are you… alright," he asked in a flat, awkward voice. I was pretty sure Danny had demanded he ask me, and I was equally sure Wyn had *not* wanted to.

The thought almost made me smile. "I'm fine."

Another quick nod. "Fine then. I will come back. Be careful."

Then he was gone, as quick as he'd come, black smoke curling through the window and vanishing.

I exhaled and crossed back over to the cot, thumping down onto it and reluctantly laying back. I needed to sleep, but my brain was wired. Still, I forced myself to lay there even as my eyes remained steadfastly open, staring at the dark ceiling and listening to the sounds of the monsters outside. Eventually my cell got lighter as the sun rose outside and the monsters started to quiet down.

I wasn't sure when I managed to fall asleep, sheer exhaustion taking me under, but I jerked awake when cell doors started clanging open loudly.

"Get up," a guard shouted from somewhere outside.

My heart was beating hard from the abrupt awakening. I sat up, wiping a hand over my face, feeling grimy and sweaty and shaky with exhaustion. My stomach was empty. I wondered if they would feed us here. Surely they wanted their human fighters to stay well-fed.

It took a few more minutes for them to get to my cell, and while I waited I drank water from the small sink above the toilet with a grimace, trying hard not to think about it. I recognised the cold eyes of the guard who'd watched me intently when he opened up my cell door and waited silently for me to step past him.

When I did, I could see the other fighters exiting their cells on the floors below me. I scanned their faces, and my heart thudded hard when I spotted Charlie. He was on the next floor down, already heading towards the staircase with dozens of other fighters.

Shit. I was too late to see which cell he'd come out of. I had to get down there and talk to him.

Ignoring the guard, I headed for the staircase and stomped down the steps as fast as possible, gritting my teeth when the other fighters making their way down from my floor slowed my progress. I kept one eye on Charlie. He was walking next to a tall guy, and I could see them talking.

As I got to the next floor down and turned to head to the next staircase, someone stepped in front of me. It was a short, wiry looking guy with black hair. "You new?" he grunted.

I gritted my teeth as I tried to peer round him. When I couldn't spot Charlie, I wanted to scream.

Temper threatening to boil over, I turned murderous eyes back to the guy. "Yeah," I managed to get out, voice tight.

He eyed me warily, gaze hovering on my scar and the snarl of my top lip. "Watch out for the tallest guard. He unlocked the cells on our floor this morning. He's the nastiest." His dark eyes looked past me, no doubt to the guard in question, and narrowed. "He'll find any excuse to get mean."

I exhaled slowly, trying to calm down. To not punch this guy in the fucking face for making me lose sight of Charlie. I forced myself to say, "Thanks for the heads up."

He nodded and turned to carry on walking. By the time I got down to the main floor, I couldn't see Charlie anywhere. I looked around frantically, trying to be discreet, but my stomach was knotting up with worry with every second that passed where I couldn't spot him in the crowd of people.

I froze when I finally caught sight of the tall guy Charlie had been walking with. He'd do. I started heading towards him with determination when the main doors to the cell block were shoved open with a screech.

"Line up," one of the guards shouted as two others wheeled in old shopping carts full of packages. The one I'd just been warned about stood to the side with his gun in his hands, cold eyes scanning the fighters as they dutifully formed a line at the side of the room.

After a moment of indecision, I reluctantly joined them, figuring that standing out this early wouldn't be a good idea. Especially when the tall, cold-eyed guard's gaze focused on me until I moved.

I was right near the back of the long line, but I faintly heard the guard up front say, "Cuff," in a bored voice as the first fighter stepped up.

I craned my neck to watch. The fighter raised his wrist so that the guard could read the number on his cuff. "Three-nine-one," the guard called out. The two manning the shopping carts rifled through the packages until they found what they were looking for. A plastic bag was chucked at the fighter carelessly, who fumbled to grab it and hurriedly walked to one of the tables.

As the next fighter stepped up to the guard and raised their wrist, I watched the guy sit down at the table with his bag. He pulled out a lump wrapped in brown parcel paper, dark with oil, and grimaced when an indiscernible hunk of dark, charred meat was revealed. With a look of resignation, he lifted it to his mouth and started to eat.

Food. These were food packages.

I noticed the same guy who'd warned me about the guard was still in front of me, so I subtly leaned forward and nudged his shoulder. "This is our food?"

The guy glanced back and nodded. "Your owners should have sent some in."

My stomach dropped. The owners had to feed the fighters? It made sense, but… did Edin know that? I tried to remember if the monster at the sign-up table had mentioned it. I was pretty sure she hadn't. I was pretty sure she'd been too busy trying to fuck Edin instead of sharing that kind of basic fucking information.

I exhaled. Maybe there was a chance Edin had found out. I stayed in the line, and it took a painfully long time for the guards to hand out the fighters' food. I scanned every face five times, wondering if I had somehow missed Charlie, but he wasn't here.

Where the fuck had he gone? He'd been here. He'd been *so close.*

When the tall guy he'd been speaking to got his food package and unhurriedly walked to the farthest table to sit on his own, I made up my mind. I waited in the line, but wasn't surprised when the guard up front told me there was nothing for me, their eyes crinkling as they shot me a cruel smile behind their mask.

Whatever. I refused to react, silently turning and walking away.

Heading straight for the tall guy still sitting on his own.

"Hey." I thumped into the seat opposite him. He didn't even look up, hunched over the table as he shovelled food into his mouth. "The guy you were talking to before. Dark hair. You sharing a cell with him?"

The guy's chewing slowed. When he glanced up at me, I noticed his eyes were almost unnaturally dark. He looked big. Almost as big as me.

"Yeah. So?" he eventually grunted.

"You see where he went?"

"Training." He returned to his meal.

I glanced around us quickly to make sure no one was listening, before resting my forearms on the table to lean forward. "I need something."

"Not interested." The guy's response was immediate.

I gritted my teeth, trying to keep my voice calm. "I just need to know your cell number."

He stopped eating and watched me, eyes sharp. We stared at each other in silence for a long moment, and I could tell that he was assessing me. Sizing me up. "Why."

I had to be careful. I couldn't tell him too much, but I needed to reveal enough so he believed me. I leaned in closer and lowered my voice. "I'm here to get the guy you're sharing a cell with."

"Get?" he asked immediately, voice sharp but low. "What do you mean, *get*? You mean kill him?"

"No," I said straight away, shaking my head. "Fuck no. I'm here to get him *out*."

The guy let out a disbelieving snort. "You think you can get out?"

"I can. I have a way to get out of here."

I was taking a calculated risk. This guy could go to the guards and tell them what I said. But even if he did, what could he really say? That some random human approached him and told him he knew a way out? They probably got that all the time. It wasn't like it would stop Wyn.

The fighter raised a sardonic brow before his expression became stoic once more as he returned to shovelling food into his mouth. “Heard that before.”

I watched him eat, my stomach growling, but I ignored it. “Yeah, well, if you tell me your cell number, *you* can get out too, because we’ll be opening it up. You benefit from this. So you can either take the risk of believing me or stay in here until a monster rips your head off.”

He bared his teeth at me in an almost monster-like snarl. “Been here six months and managed just fine without getting anything ripped off. Thanks for your concern.”

I reared back, surprised. Six months? Jesus Christ. What was this guy made of? I eyed him dubiously. “Then surely you’re ready to leave.”

He let out an incredulous huff—not quite a laugh. “*Ready to leave*? You think I’m in here willingly?” He leaned closer, narrowing his eyes at me. This close, I could see the faint yellowing around his right eye; the remnants of deep bruising. “If there was any way of getting out, I would have found it. So don’t kid yourself.”

I shook my head, frustrated. I didn’t know shit about this guy, so I wasn’t going to tell him the details. Instead, I changed tack. “Look man, I just need to know your cell number. If you tell me, you *will* have a chance to get out. Your cell door will be open, the guards will be out of commission, and you can walk out. Or you can stay in your cell and spend the rest of your fuckin’ life in here, if that’s what you want.”

He watched me for a long moment, chewing slowly on the hard protein sticks his owners had given him. “Why you doing this?” he eventually asked. “He your boyfriend or something?”

I rolled my eyes impatiently. “Yeah, sure, he’s my boyfriend. Whatever. Will you tell me?”

He watched me in silence again, finishing his meal. My shoulders got tight and my hands balled up into fists. I wanted to punch the guy in the fucking mouth for making me wait. Eventually, he shrugged one big shoulder in a miniscule movement. “Fine.”

When he didn’t say anything else, I clenched my jaw and stared at him in expectant silence. His expression remained flat as he stared back at me. “I think you’re full of shit. About getting out of here, I mean. But…” He pursed his lips for a brief moment, looking away. “If you do, there’s something you can do for me.”

“I told you, you’ll be able to get out too.” If this guy was sharing Charlie’s cell, it was an inevitability. The cell door would be open. He’d be able to come with us. I wouldn’t stop him.

He looked back at me, something like pure longing flashing through his eyes for a second. Then he gave another reluctant shrug, like he thought it was a show of weakness to even consider the fact I might be telling the truth. “Won’t hold you to it. But…”

When he paused, I jerked my chin at him. Impatience was making my temper threaten to boil over, but I managed to hold on a little longer. “Go on.”

He exhaled a hard breath. “If you’re ever heading south, through Nebraska? There’s a raider camp there, near the South Dakota state line. They’re pretty peaceful. They won’t shoot you on sight.”

I huffed out a humourless sound. “Always a good start.”

“The leader’s name is Anchor,” the guy continued, ignoring my remark. “If you come across them, just… tell her that Cat is alright.”

I presumed he was Cat. “Is that it?”

He jerked his chin down in a single nod. “Just tell her I’m still alive. That I’m okay.”

I eyed him. “You’re not, though.”

His lips clamped shut into a grim line. “Not looking for your opinion, asshole.”

“Don’t care. Giving it. You’re not *okay*. You’re stuck in here being forced to fight.” I leaned closer again. “I mean it. I can get you out. With—” I nearly said Charlie’s name, but it felt like a bad idea. “When we open your cell door, you’ll be able to come with us.”

He watched me silently for a moment. Then he said, “With you and Charlie.”

My pulse jumped in alarm at hearing him say it. Like somehow Charlie’s name being uttered here would make him… what, more of a target? I wasn’t even sure. It just felt dangerous. “Yes,” I muttered. “So shut up.” Then I narrowed my eyes at him. “You been talking to him?”

Cat nodded once. “He’s a good guy.” He paused, then grunted. “Talks a lot, though.”

I almost wanted to chuckle. “Yeah.” He talked a lot when he was anxious. “I’m doing you a favour getting him out of here.”

Cat grunted again. “And he hums these old songs all the time—”

“Yeah,” I interrupted, wiping a hand down my tired face. “Tell me about it. Drives me fucking crazy.” Affection shot through me, though. God, I wanted to get Charlie out of this shithole.

I thought Cat almost chuckled. In the end, though, he just glanced to the side, his weird dark eyes taking in the guard leaning over the railing on the floor above, watching us.

Then he picked up the rest of his food. “B15,” he grunted in a low voice before he stood up and walked away.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

When my number was called out by one of the guards about ten minutes after Cat walked away, it took me a long moment to realise they were speaking to me.

The guard shouted it again, sounding angry at being ignored, when it finally pinged in my consciousness and I jolted up from the table. “Here,” I yelled back, trying to find the guard who’d been calling it.

I spotted him a moment later, standing at the door that the other guard had brought me in through the night before. I hesitantly started walking towards him.

He grunted when I reached him. “Your owner wants you for training. You’re fighting tonight.”

My *owner*? I bristled at the words, but then I realised what the guard meant. I’d be able to see Edin. I’d be able to tell him our cell numbers to pass on to Wyn.

I’d also be fighting tonight.

Shit.

I nodded, remembering only at the last second not to seem too eager at the thought of seeing my ‘owner’. “Fine.”

I followed the guard through the building, once again timing how long it took for us to get outside and recounting the number of doors he locked behind us. I blinked in the bright sunlight when he pushed open the front doors in the lobby and shoved me through them. They slammed shut behind him, and the same monster who’d been guarding the door last night peered down at me with a brow raised.

“Hunter.”

At the sound of Edin’s deep, rumbling voice, my heart leaped in my chest. I turned, eyes darting to seek him out—and there he was, his pale lavender skin gleaming in the sunlight, big muscles flexing as he walked. I jogged towards him as he strode across the cracked pavement, big eyes sweeping over me, checking me over. God, I wished I could grab his horns and kiss him hard.

“Are you okay, josdo?” he murmured when we met in the middle. “Did anything happen?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine, scratch.” I was practically bursting with the need to tell him. “But I found out Charlie’s cell number. You need to tell Wyn. B15. He’s sharing with another guy—make sure you let Wyn know so he’s not surprised by him. The guy helped me—he’s fine.”

I was babbling, trying to get it all out, like I was worried I’d forget the details if I held it in for much longer. “My cell is B37,” I went on. “In case Wyn didn’t notice before. Okay? B15 and B37.” I couldn’t help but grip Edin’s wrist tight. “There’ve been six guards in there with us most of the time. And they have military rifles. They’re lethal. You have to let Wyn know. He has to be careful.”

“Hunter,” Edin rumbled again, briefly running his palm down the back of my head. “Calm. I will tell Wyn all of it. I promise.”

I sagged, wishing I could wrap my arms around his big body and let him take my weight for a while. “Okay. Sorry.” I let out a shaky breath. “We’re so close, scratch.” I thought of something else. “There are three doors the guards keep locked between the entrance and the cell block,” I told Edin. “They all have a set of keys for them. We’ll have to grab them before we go. Can you tell Wyn?”

Edin’s lips quirked into a brief smile, the tip of his right fang flashing momentarily. “I will tell Wyn all of it, I promise,” he repeated, his low voice soothing the sharp edges of urgency in my gut. “Did they feed you?” he then asked, running concerned eyes over my face. “Have you had water? Have you slept?”

“I slept a little, and I’ve had plenty of water.” I hesitated, worried Edin would feel guilty about the food. “But apparently feeding the fighters is up to the monster *owners*.” The word tasted bad in my mouth. “They sent food in with the guards this morning and the guards distributed it. So no, I haven’t eaten. I guess that asshole at the signing up table forgot to let you know about that when she was busy trying to fuck you.”

“You haven’t eaten?” Edin bared his fangs in a monster-like show of unhappiness. “That is not good. We have to get you some food. You need your strength.”

His words made apprehension tighten my gut. I remembered what the guard had said. “I’m fighting tonight,” I murmured to Edin. “The guard told me. I must be on the roster already.”

Edin let out a small distressed noise. “I don’t like this.”

“I’ll be okay,” I said automatically. I tilted my head side to side, cracking my neck, trying to mentally prepare myself for potentially having to fight another person in a few hours. A horrifying thought hit me. “Shit, do you think they’ll pair me and Charlie up together? Because we’re both new?”

“I don’t know, josdo.” Edin sounded edgy, like the thought of any of it was working him up.

I swallowed. “Are they… They’re not fights to the death, right?”

Edin shook his head. “Not between the humans, no. But…” He looked uneasy. “I have been listening to the others. The human-monster fights… some of those can be death matches. And then there are armed matches… But that doesn’t matter,” he added quickly. “We will be gone tonight. And neither of you will be fighting a monster before that. So don’t worry.”

“He’s early on the schedule tonight, friend,” the gangly monster with brown hair guarding the prison entrance called over to us. He was watching us, but we weren’t close enough for him to hear our conversation. “You don’t want to waste time chatting with him when you need to be training him up.”

Edin went tense beside me. Before he could snarl anything back at the monster, I grabbed his wrist again and pulled him away. “He’s right. I should probably practise if I *am* fighting tonight.”

Edin grunted. “You need food first.”

He started leading me further away from all the other clusters of monsters. Today, I could see humans with them being trained. Some were going up against cobbled together punching bags, while others were sparring with monsters. Most of them were already bruised and battered. Several looked exhausted, like they were about to pass out as their monster owners yelled at them to keep going. Some were well-fed, others gaunt and pale.

It was brutal to witness, and I felt a flash of intense guilt that we would be leaving all these other humans in here to suffer. *Was* there a way for Wyn to free all of them safely? Part of me wanted to ask if he’d be willing to come back once we were safely away from here to do it… but that wasn’t fair. To him, or to Danny.

I wondered if I could tell the military what was happening here when Charlie and I got back. They would probably be interested in shutting down this operation, or at least looking into it. They could free the humans.

But for some reason, everything inside me rebelled at the idea of telling the military. Especially when I pictured the guards' rifles and vests. Unease roiled through me. Something wasn't right here. It wasn't adding up, and some deep, instinctive voice inside me was telling me it would be a very, very big mistake for me to let the military know that I was aware of this place.

Danny jumped to his feet as we approached their little spot, set well back from all the others, further away from the building. He hurried over. "You okay? How you doing? Is Charlie okay? Have you seen him yet? Wyn told me you hadn't been able to earlier."

I almost wanted to smile at the endearing thread of worry in Danny's voice as he hammered questions at me. "I'm good, man. Thanks. I got a glimpse of Charlie when they let us out of our cells, but then he was taken away for training before I could speak to him. I got his cell number, though."

"Awesome." Danny gave me a gentle punch on the shoulder. "That's great. We'll get him. Have you eaten? Do you want some water?"

I followed Danny back to where Wyn was sitting hunched on the ground, Edin already beside him, telling him everything I'd just blurted out to him in a rush. I nodded at the Soul Eater, and he nodded back, but I could tell he was listening intently to Edin's low voice, sitting deathly still.

The lack of sleep and food caught up with me, and I sank down beside Danny as he pulled out an MRE and hurriedly started sorting through its contents. He made me the coffee first, which I sipped gratefully as he heated up the meal in the ration heater. I trusted Edin to tell Wyn everything he needed to know, so I didn't try and interrupt as they murmured to each other.

I ate fast, all too aware that I would be fighting in a few hours, so I definitely needed to get some practice in before then. My reflexes were still sharp, but I had no idea who I'd be going up against. I thought about Cat. He was obviously near unbeatable, if he'd been here six months and was still in fighting shape. Had he gone up against monsters yet? I figured he must have done. If I was paired with him for my first fight, I wasn't sure how well I'd do.

When I finished eating, I looked over at Edin and Wyn. "So it looks like we might have to wait 'til after the fights," I said, my voice already tight

with nerves. “I don’t know if they keep the fighters in their cells while the fights are happening or not. It’s too risky if they’re all out.”

Wyn nodded. “I have your cell numbers. I will keep checking the cell block. As soon as it is safe, I will get you out.”

“Did Edin tell you about the other guy—”

“He told me,” Wyn interrupted. “I know not to hurt him.”

“Okay. And he can come with us if he wants, right? I don’t mean with us once we leave here, but he can escape the building with us. Right?” I was babbling again. But I did want to make sure Cat got at least a chance to escape with us. He’d helped me when he didn’t have to.

“If he stays quiet and doesn’t put up a fuss, I don’t care,” Wyn said shortly.

I exhaled. “Okay. Good. Okay. So I’ll… I guess I’ll see you later tonight.” I ignored the flurry of nerves low in my stomach.

“Good luck, Hunter,” Danny said, his voice sincere. “Be careful in your fight.”

“I will.” I cleared my throat and looked over at Edin. “Will you help me train?” I asked him.

Edin’s brows pulled low. “I don’t like this,” he growled, just like he had earlier.

“Does Hunter even need to go back in?” Danny piped up. “We could leave right now. Wyn could come back later and get Charlie, now we know his cell number.”

Sheer relief broke out over Edin’s craggy features, but I ruined it by shaking my head. “I need to talk to him. Wyn won’t have much time, and we need to make sure Charlie cooperates without question. Which he absolutely will not do if the Soul Eater appears in his cell and tells him to leave with him.”

Wyn huffed out a low sound of amusement. “Good point.”

Edin was shaking his head vehemently. “*No,* Hunter. If Wyn tells Charlie that he is with you—”

“He’s not going to trust him, scratch,” I interrupted. “I know Charlie. He’ll put up a fight.” I leaned forward to rest my hand on his knee. “I’ll be *fine*, Edin. I can handle one fight.” I really fucking hoped I didn’t prove myself wrong. “Didn’t that monster say you could speak to the fightmaster about who you wanted me to go up against? Why don’t we go look at the

boards and find her? We'll pick someone who's bartering low-level shit, so we know they're not a tough opponent."

Edin exhaled and shoved to his feet. "Fine," he snarled, already stomping away. "Come on then, if you insist on this foolishness."

I gaped at him in shock for a second, before scrambling to my feet, getting out a hurried thanks to Danny as I jogged after him. "Scratch—"

"*No,* Hunter." Edin rounded on me. "This is *madness.* You are *willingly* going back in there knowing you will have to fight? You might get badly hurt."

"I need to tell Charlie," I insisted. "He won't believe anything Wyn tells him if he doesn't see me for himself. I *know* him, Edin." I stepped closer, briefly brushing my knuckles down his abs. "This is the safest way. The best way for us to pull this off without anything going wrong. I can *handle* a fight. I can."

Edin growled out an inhuman, frustrated sound that made the hairs on my back of my neck stand up. "I know you *can*, but I *do not want you to*," he snarled.

My patience finally wore out. "I'm doing it, Edin," I gritted out, poking him in the sternum. "So stop throwing a damn tantrum and *help me train*."

"Hey." A loud, female voice interrupted us, yelling over. We both turned to see a tall, slender human woman striding towards us, dressed all in black. A bright red mask covered the lower half of her face, standing out like a beacon against her dark skin and clothing. Her curly black hair was pulled back into a bun.

She was carrying a clipboard. A tall, hulking monster with leathery tan skin approached behind her, his beady black eyes assessing us already. Big tusks jutted up from his jaw, distorting his lower lip.

"Edin?" the woman asked as she reached us. "New fighter, yeah?" She didn't wait for a response. "I'm putting him in tonight. One of the first fights to get the crowd riled up. They love fresh meat."

So this was the fightmaster. Part of me wasn't shocked that it was a human, but the thought of this seemingly normal, average-looking woman orchestrating this entire fucked up enterprise was jarring.

"I don't want him to fight tonight," Edin said in a dismissive, arrogant tone. "Put him in tomorrow. I need to train him up a bit more."

The hulking monster let out a low chuff and took a step forward. The fightmaster stopped him with a hand to his hairy stomach and stared hard at

Edin over her mask. “It’s not up for debate, *friend.* I was just coming over to do you the courtesy of giving you say in who he goes up against. What’s his skill level?” She looked down at her clipboard, back to being all business in an instant.

Edin hesitated. “He’s rusty,” he said in the end. Even though I knew it was stupid, I wanted to puff up my chest with indignation. “I want to ease him into it.”

The fightmaster made a vaguely annoyed sound. “That sounds boring. Although…” she eyed me. “You’re a big one, aren’t you, pal? Even if you are rusty, I bet you can bring a beating. The crowd will love that—a newbie coming in and taking us all by surprise.”

She paused, tilting her head as she looked down at the clipboard. “We do have another new fighter as well…”

She glanced back at the silent monster. “What do you think, babe? Put the two newbies up against each other?”

Fear shot through me at the possibility of having to fight Charlie, but I was distracted by what she’d said. *Babe*? Was she *with* this monster? Maybe I’d been right and this *was* a joint venture between a monster and a human. Bet these two thought they were a verified fucking power couple out here in the Wastes.

The monster grunted. “The crowds will respond better if we pair the new ones up against known fighters,” he said in a deep, beastly voice. He nodded at me. “Especially if we expect this one to win. They enjoy a surprise. Keeps the betting interesting, too.”

The fightmaster nodded. “Yeah, good point. Thanks, babe.” She gave his stomach a brief caress before returning her hand to the clipboard, sliding the pencil out of its holder at the side. “Let’s put you up against… two-one-one. And the other newbie can be with… five-eight-five. Check the board to see what they’re bartering, if you care about that.”

“Good choices, love.” The monster caressed her slender shoulder with a thick, clawed hand, his distorted features twisting into something resembling a smile.

Despite how bad these people were, how much I disagreed with what they were doing, I begrudgingly admitted to myself that they seemed to be a genuine loving couple. The big hulking monster was gazing at her with blatant adoration on his beastly face.

The fightmaster finished scribbling something on her clipboard and looked up. “Seven o’clock,” she told Edin. “Make sure he’s ready.”

She looked at me then, her dark eyes hard. “I can feel the judgement rolling off you, big guy,” she told me in a curt voice. “Maybe you’re new to the Wastes. But this isn’t a place for soft feelings. For compassion. To survive, you have to be ruthless.” She waved a hand towards the prison. “This is how *I* survive. How *we* survive.”

She grabbed the big monster’s hand, and I noticed how careful he was of his claws as he engulfed her fingers with his. The fightmaster nodded at me once. “Good luck in your fight,” she said, before they turned and walked away, hand in hand.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Despite my big words to Edin, my constant reassurances that I'd be totally fine… I was nervous.

Edin had trained with me a for a couple of hours, but he hadn't wanted me to get too worn out before the real fight. I was pretty sure he could tell that I hadn't had much sleep.

As he walked me back to the prison entrance, I frantically tried to find Charlie in the sprawling crowd of monsters training their humans. I looked for the behamots or the kolebs, but couldn't see them anywhere.

When I spotted a big, hulking monster with pale grey skin covered in scars and a thick dark mane down its back, chained up, I remembered what Wyn had said when we'd first found out about the fighting competition. Monsters fought too. And by the looks of it, some of *them* were here against their will just like the human fighters. This one was snarling at what was no doubt its owner, a small wiry creature with six arms that it was using to hurl rocks at the big monster.

There was another monster pacing in a big cage with thick bars, his movements somehow graceful and cat-like despite the tension coursing through his long body. He was more humanoid than the snarling beast, long hair hiding his downturned face and dark clothing on his body. But the way he moved was animalistic. Predatory and fierce.

"Do not let anyone see your prosthetic," Edin whispered to me, pulling my focus away from the chaos that was the monster camp surrounding the building. "They will try and use that perceived weakness against you."

I nodded. "I won't."

"Do not hesitate, Hunter." Edin's deep voice was anxious, his posture tense as we approached the main entrance of the building. We stopped so we could have a few more minutes of speaking in private, but the tall hairy monster guarding the door was already watching us with interest. "Do not think about the other fighter. Worry only about yourself." Edin turned to look at me, big eyes worried. "Be careful, josdo."

"I will. It'll be quick. Soon we'll be out of here." I gave him a small smile.

Edin exhaled and shot the monster guard a dark look, one corner of his top lip lifting to show his fangs in a little snarl. “I wish we had some privacy,” he said, then looked back at me. “I want to kiss you badly, my Hunter.”

My heart melted. “Me too,” I murmured. “Soon, okay? You’re gonna fuck me ‘til I can’t walk after this, remember? I’m holding you to that.”

The teasing achieved its purpose—Edin’s features relaxed slightly, and his lips quirked into a small smirk. “I believe I said I’d fuck you until you forgot your own name, actually,” he rumbled, then leaned forward just a little, gaze dropping to my scarred mouth and lust flaring in his gleaming eyes. “And I will.”

A little thread of hot anticipation shot through me, chasing away some of the anxiety for a brief moment. “I look forward to it, scratch.”

Edin chuckled. “As do I.” But then his face became serious again. “I will see you later tonight. Try and rest until then.” He reached out and briefly palmed the side of my neck, thumb stroking along my jaw. “Be safe.”

He dropped his hand fast, as aware of the nosy monster guard as I was. I shot him a nod and turned to walk to the entrance, when what I really wanted to do was plaster myself against him and kiss him until we were both breathless.

I ignored the monster guard, who leered at me as he shoved open the door. The human guard straightened up from his lazy slouch against the wall as I stepped inside, the lobby cool after hours of practising fighting moves in the heat. The guard patted me down for weapons before leading me back into the cell block without saying a word.

Fighters were milling about the main space when I stepped into the cell block, some eating again, others practising fighting together. I supposed even though they all had to go up against each other, it was in everyone’s best interests to stay alive, so there wasn’t much of an air of true competition in here. It wasn’t like any of them were here of their own free will—as far as I was aware.

My heart stopped when I saw a familiar dark head bent over a table at the back of the room.

I forced myself to walk slowly, even as my heartrate picked up. But I didn’t know what the guards would do if they realised Charlie and I knew each other, so I wasn’t going to risk it.

His head jerked up when I thudded down beside him on the bench, grey eyes narrowing as he opened his mouth to no doubt tell me to fuck off. He froze. “Hunter?” he breathed shakily.

I shot him a tiny smile. “Can you maybe take a break from getting yourself in dumb fucking situations after this one?”

“What the *fuck* are you doing in here,” Charlie hissed, ignoring my weak joke as his face flushed with anger. “Did you get yourself put in here, you stupid prick?”

“Not exactly the welcome I was expecting, but fine.” I lowered my voice. “We’re getting you out. Tonight.”

Charlie’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head before he managed, with great effort, to school his features, conscious of the guards always watching. “What the fuck?” he hissed. “How? What? *We?* Is that big purple guy still with you?”

I nodded once. “Yes. And—don’t freak out—but the Soul Eater is helping.”

Charlie couldn’t help turning to stare at me. “The… *Soul Eater?*” he gritted out. “You’re… How the *fuck* did you—” he spluttered, but I didn’t let him finish.

“We don’t have time to go through everything, so you need to listen to me, okay?” I paused. “*Okay*, Charlie?” I urged when he continued to stare at me dumbly.

When he finally nodded, looking dazed, I carried on. “Tonight after our fights, the Soul Eater is going to come and disarm the guards and get us out of our cells.” Charlie parted his lips to speak, but I kept talking in a rush. “I spoke to Cat and he knows he can come with us.”

“Hunter, the fucking *Soul Eater?*” Charlie hissed, glancing around us again. “What the fuck? You can’t trust him, he’s—”

“Charlie,” I interrupted in a hard, low voice, making him shut up. “You have to trust *me*. You know I’d never fucking risk you. I’m asking you to trust me.”

He was quiet for a long moment except for the hard breaths coming from his nose as he stared at me. At length, he nodded once. “You know I trust you.” He turned away and, with effort, affected a bored expression, as though we were talking about mundane shit. “But if you leave me alone with the fucking Soul Eater, I’ll kill you myself.”

My lips twitched. “Fair.”

Charlie kept his bored gaze fixed firmly on the wall in front when he spoke in a low murmur. “Hunter, we have another problem. The military is here.”

It took me a second to catch up with the subject change—and with what he’d said. “What?” I muttered back, furtively glancing around. I felt foolish when I couldn’t help but ask, “You mean they… they’re here to shut it down or…?”

Charlie’s head moved in a stilted shake. “No, I mean… they have a fighter here.”

At that, I turned to stare at him. “The fuck do you mean?”

“I saw them. Outside when the big guys were training me. I recognised some of them. Do you remember Lieutenant Mallory? He was transferred to the specimen programme about six years ago—”

“I remember,” I said quickly, palms going clammy at the name.

Fuck. Mallory was here. Not only was the military here, but *Mallory* was here? My hairline prickled with sweat. Did I tell Wyn? Or Danny? What would the Soul Eater do if he found out before he got me and Charlie out—would he lose his mind and forget the plan to go and kill the lieutenant instead?

Feeling sick, I slid my gaze over to the nearest guard, taking in his thick bulletproof vest and that lethal rifle in his hands. Now it made sense.

“They’re funding this,” I muttered.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Charlie jolt beside me. “No, no,” he murmured back, voice doubtful. “They just have a fighter. A soldier.” I heard Charlie swallow. “He looks… he seems drugged,” he whispered.

Revulsion twisted my belly. “How do you know?”

“Two o’clock,” Charlie muttered. I followed his direction and looked at the stocky guy sitting alone at a table nearby, half-slumped over it. His face was grey, eyes drooping. His hair was shaved short and his body was thick with muscle. If he’d been lucid, he could have been a threat.

But Charlie was right. This guy was drugged to within an inch of his life. Surely he couldn’t fight in that state.

“Jesus,” I muttered. “You sure he’s a soldier?”

Charlie nodded. “Saw the insignia tattoo on him outside when he took his shirt off. Plus I heard one of them say he enlisted fifteen months ago.”

Fear shot through me. “Did they see you?”

Charlie shook his head. “No. Or at least, they didn’t recognise me.”

I exhaled. “Shit. Okay.” I scrubbed a rough hand down my exhausted face. “Okay, let’s… deal with that when we’re out of here. We can think about what…” I trailed off, too mentally exhausted to even consider it for too long.

“I didn’t know what to do.” Charlie’s voice was low and shaky. “At first I wanted to shout out to them, so they’d help me, but…” He shook his head.

I resisted the urge to grip his shoulder. “I don’t think it would be a good idea if the military found out we know about this.”

Charlie exhaled. “Yeah,” he croaked. “Fuck, this is all just… Fuck all of this.” He wiped a hand down his face and let out a humourless sound.

“Yeah.” I forced myself to look away from him and stare down at the peeling tabletop. “We’ll be out soon, Charlie. Just get through your fight and do *not* start yelling when the Soul Eater appears in your cell later.”

He huffed. “I’ll try.”

“Maybe try and get some rest before then, huh?” I shot him a quick look. He looked haggard, tired and pale, his face appearing thinner than it had been just a couple of weeks ago, although that could have been down to the straggly beard he was sporting. He’d always hated when he hadn’t been able to shave.

“Still got the razor,” I told him to try and cheer him up a little. “And I think it’s got some charge. You can shave that ugly thing off in a few hours.”

Charlie chuckled and raised a hand to scrub it through the dark wiry hair. “Shit, I can’t wait.” He glanced at me. “You should get some rest too. How’s your leg?”

Honestly, it ached—especially because I hadn’t been able to remove my prosthetic and rest my stump the night before. But I could cope for a few more hours. “Fine.”

Charlie nodded once and opened his mouth to speak again, but then he went stiff. “Guard watching,” he muttered. He placed his palms on the table and heaved himself up. “Be safe. Win your fight. I’ll see you later.”

I didn’t answer, feeling the cold eyes of the guard on me, and fixed a bored expression on my face as Charlie walked away. After a few minutes had passed, I slowly stood up and ambled over to the staircase to head up to my cell. I did need to try and get some more sleep before the fight. I was edgy and overly tired, and we’d have a long night of walking after we got out of here.

The top floor was quiet when I got up there, all the cell doors open. Another fighter was sleeping on their cot as I walked past, but all the other cells were empty. I stepped inside mine, glad for the cool quietness of the room but more grateful to be away from the cruel eyes of the guards. I pulled the door until it was almost closed, blocking out the artificial lights.

I lay down on my cot and rolled onto my side, facing the wall, to try and block everything out enough to get just an hour's sleep. It would be enough to refresh me and give me time to prepare mentally before I had to fight.

It felt like I'd never be able to sleep again, but the next thing I knew, I was jerking awake to the sound of the guard shouting out a fighter's number and telling him he had five minutes. A second later there was the drag of a deadbolt being pulled back and a cell door swinging open. Then the process repeated again with another fighter's number.

Shit. My heart was thumping and I was sweating, already shivering in the cold air of the room as it cooled on my skin. I heaved myself round and planted my boots on the floor, roughly scrubbing at my face to wake myself up.

The bright light from the main room hurt my eyes as I stepped out of my cell. When I looked over the railing to the floor below, my stomach cramped with tension as I saw Charlie standing near the main doors, tense and tight as he shifted on his feet. On the other side of the room was another fighter, this one rangy but already bruised and battered. He was pacing, muttering to himself as he cast furtive glances over at Charlie, sizing him up.

The rest of the fighters were gone, and I noticed all the other cell doors shut. They must have missed mine because I'd almost closed the door myself when I came up here earlier. That fact only confirmed what I'd already suspected—that even though these guards had military equipment, they weren't soldiers themselves. They were too sloppy.

My eyes shot to the big clock above the door. 6.25pm. Shit, I'd slept through most of the first fight. Charlie was going out there in five fucking minutes.

I wanted to speak to him before, one more time, but it was too risky when the guards were right there *and* I clearly wasn't even supposed to be out here. A moment later, a huge behamot and spindly little koleb were shoving through the main doors to collect him. The behamot thumped Charlie on the back, jerking him forward, while the koleb chattered in its

high-pitched language and fussed around Charlie as they led him out of the room, followed by one of the guards.

A minute later, a tall, wispy-thin pale monster glided into the room, its long dark robes flowing out behind it. Its face was featureless except for two small dark circles that I presumed were its eyes. The fighter started shaking with fear, his face going grey. The monster placed a hand with impossibly long fingers on the back of his neck and steered him out of the room.

The cell block felt silent again. The light above me flickered, its hum ticking on and off for a few seconds before it flared back to life. I jerked back into my cell before the flickering could draw the gaze of one of the guards and they noticed me.

I silently pulled the door almost closed and paced my cell, the nerves rising inside me again, half of them for myself and half for Charlie. What was happening out there? How long was Charlie expected to fight?

I moved to the window to outside, trying to listen to the sounds of the crowd that filtered in. Wild roaring and cheering. Feral screams and snarls. Bright light shone into the cell through the thick glass, even though it was dark out now. I wondered where they were holding the fights—what the set up was.

I swallowed. I'd be finding out soon enough.

I wasn't sure how long I paced, my heart jolting every time the cheers outside got louder, or the crowd started booing. It felt like an eternity, and I came to a stop when the noise quietened a little after a final burst of cheering.

Was it over? Was Charlie okay? I hurried over to the cell door and peered out of the tiny window, even though I already knew I couldn't see the ground floor from it. I considered sneaking back out but didn't want to risk pissing off any of the guards right before my fight—I was sure they'd love to start me off at a disadvantage by pistol-whipping me or taking out a kneecap.

My palms started sweating when I heard the main doors of the cell block creak open. There were no voices, but I still strained to listen. Tired footsteps thumped up the metal stairs and dragged along the grating on the floors below mine. Cell doors groaned and deadbolts shrieked as they slid across, locking the fighters back inside. Then silence.

I quickly moved away from the door when I heard footsteps heading up to the top floor a few moments later, these ones faster and more alert. A guard. I schooled my features when my cell door creaked as it was pushed open.

“Why’s your door open,” the guard with the cold eyes growled as he stared at me from the threshold.

I strode to the door and brushed past him as if he wasn’t holding a military-grade rifle in his hands. “Guess you forgot to lock it.”

When I stepped out of my cell and looked over the railing, my stomach lurched with a confusing mixture of apprehension and relief.

Edin stared back up at me from the main floor, huge arms crossed over his chest, his handsome face pulled into a tight, worried frown.

“Time for your debut,” the guard hissed from behind me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I refused to react to the asshole guard.

Instead, I turned and walked down to the main floor, taking my time even though all I wanted to do was run to Edin and throw my arms around him.

My opponent was down there already, waiting for his monster owner to collect him. We eyed each other. He wasn't overly tall, and appeared to be in good shape, but his face was drawn and too thin for his build. He wasn't being fed enough. I could see him sweating, his brown skin gleaming in the artificial lights, but to his credit he didn't back down. He stared back at me, jaw clenched, dark eyes grimly determined.

I wanted to speak to him. To tell him… I didn't even know. That I was sorry? It was a little presumptuous of me to assume I was definitely going to beat this guy. But, I mean… I was. I was a big guy. I looked after myself, and I was strong. Shit, I'd had *training* in combat. I doubted this guy could say the same, but I could be wrong. Who knew how many soldiers the military—or at least Mallory—were shoving in here? I didn't recognise this guy, though, and couldn't see any hint of him knowing me either. Was he a raider? Or had he been kidnapped from one of the cities to fight?

I tore my gaze away to look at Edin, who was tense and bristling as he watched me approach, brows pulled low. I saw his gaze cut to the guard coming up behind me, turning cold and hard. Threatening.

"Let's go," was all he said, voice intimidatingly deep, when I reached him. One big hand gripped the back of my neck, almost too tight, and steered me through the doors into the cold hallway.

One of the guards was following us closely, and we had to keep stopping for them to unlock several doors, so we had no privacy to speak. But Edin kept his hand on the back of my neck, and his touch gentled almost imperceptibly, thumb giving my skin a brief caress.

As we made our way closer to the back of the prison, where the old yard was, I could hear different sounds echoing from somewhere else in the building. Fists smashing hard into metal. Furious snarls. Distorted voices yelling and screaming. A single inhuman roar bled over the general din of

the waiting, baying crowd outside, sending shivers coursing down my spine.

My stomach lurched. “What is that,” I couldn’t help but ask.

It was the guard who answered. “Monster fighters. We keep ‘em in the maximum security wing.”

Of course. I’d seen for myself that there were monsters here being forced to fight, not of their own free will. They had to keep them locked up somewhere. It made me even more grateful that we had Wyn to help us get out. Even if Charlie and I had somehow managed to get out of our cells, disarm the guards and grab their keys on our own, we still would have been wandering through a huge old prison, almost totally helpless. I’d tried hard to map the route out in my head, but one wrong turn in a labyrinthian place like this wouldn’t be good.

Bright lights started bleeding into the corridor from a set of double doors at the end. The noise from the crowd was almost deafening now. I began to sweat, furling and unfurling my fists, trying to gear myself up mentally. I would pull my punches, I decided. The guy was smaller than me. Maybe I’d be able to furtively speak to him—tell him one of us should take the fall to just get it over with. I wasn’t sure how reasonable he’d be in the moment.

My breath caught in my chest when we stepped outside and a blast of cool air hit my heated skin. We were on the edge of the old prison yard, but cobbled together bleachers had been constructed from sheets of metal, planks of wood, old benches and chairs, ringing the entire yard on the other side of the chain link fence.

Three sides of them were packed like sardines with monsters, a writhing, teeming crowd of creatures foaming at the mouth to witness more violence, rabid and overwhelming.

The fourth stand of makeshift bleachers was filled with humans.

There weren’t as many of them squashed together, but there were enough to fill the seats, and the sight of it made me sick. I scanned my eyes over them quickly, looking for Mallory, but I couldn’t see him. Were there more military in there? Or were these all raiders?

I didn’t have time to dwell on it, because Edin was squeezing the back of my neck and bending lower to speak over the deafening sounds of the crowd. “Fight well,” was all he said, but I could hear the tight worry in his voice.

My pulse spiked again. I tried to block out everything else and focus on the fight.

I pulled my shirt off and handed it to Edin, who took it wordlessly with a confused frown. “Makes me easier to grab onto,” I told him by way of explanation. “And he could choke me with it. Just safer without.”

Edin nodded once, jaw bulging with tension. Before he could say anything, the guard stepped forward. “Your fighter needs to get out there.”

I was faintly aware of a high-pitched voice reverberating out through the sound system, tinny and crackling, announcing me as a new fighter, number eight-two-three. With a last look at Edin, I started slowly walking out towards the centre of the big, empty yard, which was lit up like a stage by bright floodlights.

My fingertips tingled with apprehension. The cacophony from the crowd rose, making me wince. The lights were overwhelmingly bright, messing with my senses, my heart hammering in my chest as a low-level hum of panic kicked up in my gut. I could have sworn I could feel the heat from the lights bearing down on me, making me sweat even though the cold air prickled at my bare torso.

Just as I reached the centre of the yard, the high-pitched voice over the speakers picked up again, announcing the other fighter, and I turned quickly to watch him step out from the shadows between the bleachers. I couldn’t see his monster owner, and I wondered if Edin was having to talk to them, pretending to be gleeful at the prospect of watching us fight.

My opponent was shivering almost imperceptibly, but whether it was fear or adrenaline-fuelled trembling, I couldn’t tell. The hulking monster who had been with the fightmaster earlier appeared in the makeshift ring, no doubt to act as some sort of referee.

He approached us, but spoke directly to me. “Fight until one of you can’t stand back up,” he said, voice growly and low. “If you refuse, you will be put back in here with one of our seasoned, *non*-human fighters.”

I gritted my teeth at that. When the monster just stood there watching me, I nodded once. He turned and ambled away, to the side of the yard, and I looked around for some kind of bell or signal to indicate when the fight would start.

A wild punch glanced off my chin, throwing my head back. “What the __”

Guess there was no signal to start the fight. The crowd bayed, howls and excited shrieks making me want to bring my shoulders up to my ears, but I couldn't because the other fighter was already lunging at me again. I jerked back, avoiding his swing, and jabbed him in the side to make him stumble back, winded, buying me a few precious seconds to think.

Everything was making it hard to concentrate. There was so much noise from the crowd, a never-ending cacophony of jeers and screams and shrieking laughter. The lights were too bright, stabbing into my brain. Impotent rage built inside me, but I tried to tamp it down so I wouldn't take it out on the other fighter. We were just a sideshow for these creatures, and the gall of it was as infuriating as it was humiliating.

I wondered if anyone watching could tell I was military, or that I had training, at least. I wondered if Mallory was in the crowd watching. If he had recognised me or Charlie. It was yet another thing to worry about, but I couldn't let the thought occupy any space in my brain in that moment.

The fighter took a wild swing at me that I easily blocked, and I almost felt pity at how unfair this was. I didn't know how long this guy had been here, but he clearly wasn't a fighter. Sheer desperation and fear-fuelled adrenaline were making him keep going, keep trying, but all his moves were sloppy and uncoordinated. Wild and illogical. Not to mention the fact that, while he wasn't a small guy, he was nowhere near my weight class. One good punch to the face from me would knock him out cold.

I frantically tried to assess whether that would be the merciful thing to do as I blocked more wild punches and threw in a half-hearted one of my own to buy myself a little time. I could knock him out and end the fight now. But would he get punished for putting on such a weak display? Would they bring out someone else for me to fight to fill the slot?

The fighter took advantage of my moment of indecision and landed a hard punch to my jaw while I was distracted. There was a swell of shouts from the crowd as my head flew to the side. I stumbled back, gut lurching as my left leg buckled and I almost lost my footing. I recovered fast, heart racing as I tried to work out if the other fighter had noticed. He hadn't seemed to. He wasn't trained to look for weaknesses in his opponents. He wasn't trained for *any* of this.

I knew I had to start fighting a bit more seriously or risk them shoving me back in here with a monster. So I jabbed him in the jaw, then the stomach to wind him, landing the punches laughably easily because he

wasn’t blocking at all. I hooked my right leg round the back of his ankle and yanked, taking him to the ground.

“Stay down,” I growled, crouching over him and pinning his neck in a light grip. He bucked up, frantic, eyes wild as he tried to get free. He wasn’t listening. I cursed and shoved him back. “*Stay down*.”

But he wasn’t. He lurched back up and flailed a leg, trying to kick me in the gut. I lunged back to avoid it, giving him time to scramble back up and dive at me.

I grunted when he shoved at my shoulders, forcing me to stumble back a few steps. I was trying not to hurt him too badly but he was operating purely on fear-soaked instinct. I couldn’t get through to him. Guilt churned in my gut, but I pushed it away as cold determination came over me.

I’d try to hurt him as little as possible, but I was going to have to beat him.

He brought his knee up to try and slam me in the groin, but I shoved him away before he could, kicking his hip to spin him onto the ground. I wasn’t fighting cleanly because I was focusing too hard on landing blows that wouldn’t seriously hurt him, but I could feel my stamina draining. I hadn’t eaten or slept enough in days, and it was starting to show.

I was tiring. It was time to end this. I just had to hope we’d put on enough of a show to satisfy the bloodthirsty crowd.

When the other fighter tried to punch me in the face again, I blocked it and jabbed at his jaw, snapping his head to the left. “I’m sorry,” I grunted before I swung again, an uppercut to his chin, knowing the momentum of his head snapping back faster than his brain would knock him out.

It worked. My fist smashed into his chin, and then all I could see were the whites of his eyes as they rolled back in his skull. I winced as he crashed back onto the ground, dead weight, hoping he hadn’t cracked his head open. But it wasn’t like I could check without rousing suspicion.

I was panting, chest heaving, dripping with sweat as the crowd quieted for a few moments. Then there was a flood of sound, rising to deafening levels. The tinny voice over the speaker announced me as the winner. The hulking monster referee appeared and slung the unconscious fighter over his shoulder, carrying him to the side of the ring. I followed in a daze.

Edin was vibrating with tension, eyes darting over me, assessing for injuries. They lingered on my jaw, which I could feel was sore and a little swollen, but it was nothing.

He handed me back my shirt without a word, and I cringed as I pulled it on over my sweaty, rapidly cooling skin. The monster handed the fighter's limp body over to his owner, a nasty-looking troll creature with pebbled, mustard-coloured skin. But I was too dazed, too amped up with adrenaline, to really take anything in. Edin's hand returned to the back of my neck, guiding me through the prison back to the cell block, soothing some of the frantic nervous energy inside me.

When we reached the block, he forcibly turned me towards him. Big, dark purple eyes stared hard into mine, and I blinked, knowing my own pupils were too wide. I blinked again, trying to focus. From the corner of my eye, I could see the other fighter's owner pass him off to two of the guards, who carried him into the block.

"Time to go," another guard grunted at us, jerking their chin towards Edin. He gritted his teeth and stared at me for another long moment. Unspoken words passed between us, causing my brain to settle just a little. To start calming down after the fight and that horrible yard that was too loud and bright. I exhaled a slow breath, Edin's dark eyes soothing me. His gaze softened just the tiniest amount, like he could tell he was helping me to calm down. Then he turned and loped away with a guard, while another nudged my leg with his boot.

"Let's go."

I reluctantly turned and walked into the cell block. It was so still and quiet in here, the artificial lights buzzing loudly far above us. The other fighter was already back in his cell. I wondered if his cellmate would look after him.

My brain was churning as the guard led me up the stairs. Was Charlie okay? How had his fight gone? Did he win? Would he be in good enough shape to get out of here and most likely walk—or maybe even run—to escape?

The guard deposited me in my cell without a word, the rough rasp of the deadbolt sounding as the door clanged shut behind him, locking me in. My breathing had returned to normal, the adrenaline leeching out of me and leaving me shaken. Sweat cooled on my body, and I shivered in the cold cell, feeling unsettled and trying not to think too hard about what I'd just done. I paced, unable to keep still after having to fight, hyper-aware of the way my skin was prickling in the air and the hum of the bright lights in the main room of the cell block.

I’d only been in there for five minutes when I heard the guards taking the next two fighters out. There was a clang from the heavy door closing, followed by silence, broken occasionally by a muffled sound from another fighter’s cell.

I froze when a faint sound registered—a rustle of fabric, a muffled grunt cut short. Then a thud.

I shot to the cell door and stared out of the small window, but I couldn’t see anything. There wasn’t a guard up here, and I was too high up to see any of the main floor. I strained my ears, trying to hear any other sounds, but it was silent again.

When oily black smoke curled up over the railing in front of me, my heartrate leapt right back up. A second later, the Soul Eater was standing outside my cell door, his face hidden in shadows, his black-stained fingers twitching by his sides.

“Ready?” he asked.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

I nodded, focused determination settling inside me, calming my heartrate and steadying my breaths. “Yeah, ready.”

A second later, I heard the deadbolt scrape across the cell door and it swung open, the Soul Eater stepping back to let me out.

“Thanks,” I whispered, even though as I stepped out of my cell and looked down, I could see the guards haphazardly piled up together, bound and unconscious, behind the bolted down table furthest away from the main doors.

“We have a good window while the fight is happening—everyone is distracted,” Wyn hissed to me. “But we still don’t have long. Now Charlie.”

The Soul Eater vanished, black smoke pouring down over the railing to the floor below. Heart thudding hard in my chest, I rushed towards the stairs and thumped down them, wincing at my heavy footsteps.

By the time I reached Charlie and Cat’s cell, Wyn had the door open and Charlie was cautiously stepping out of it, edging past the Soul Eater with a wary look on his face. I quickly scanned him over for any injuries from his fight, but aside from a split lip he seemed to be fine.

The moment he saw me, pure relief flooded his features. “Hunter.” He strode forward and yanked me into a hard hug. “You stupid asshole.”

I snorted out a rough laugh. “Fuck you.”

We jumped when a nearby fighter started hammering on their cell door. Looking over, I could see an angry, desperate face filling the tiny window of the cell next to Charlie’s. They were shouting, but as much as it made me feel like shit, I ignored them. We couldn’t. We couldn’t let them all out. It was too risky. Humans panicked and became irrational in situations like this, when their lives or their freedom were on the line. Even if we told all of them to stay quiet and sneak out, they wouldn’t. All it took was one person to start shoving, or running, or shouting, and it would be chaos.

Maybe Edin and I can come back and get them all once Charlie’s safe, I thought. But then I realised that wouldn’t be possible. Edin would be gone, and I’d be back in the military with Charlie.

A chunk of ice dropped into my belly, but I couldn’t dwell on it. We had to move. Ignoring the shouts, I strode towards Charlie’s cell and stuck my

head in. Cat was standing there, his big body frozen with indecision.

"The fuck?" I hissed. "Come on. We need to move."

Cat's face contorted for a second into a mask of agonised uncertainty, before he shook his head. "I can't."

I gaped at him. "Stop being a stupid prick and *move*," I gritted out. "This isn't a fucking trick. This is your way out. *Come. With us. Now.*"

"I *can't*," he repeated, shaking his head again, hands clenching into fists. "There's—there's someone here I can't leave without."

"For the love of—" I gritted my teeth and made a snap decision. "What cell? We'll get them. *Only* them, and only if you *fucking move right now*." Cat had helped me, so I wanted to help him back, but I was only willing to risk it for so long. We had to get moving.

Cat shook his head. "They're not in the cell block," he got out, voice rough. "Just go, man. I'll be fine."

"Are you fucking with me?" I couldn't help but hiss. "You can help them after. You'll have a better chance getting them out if *you* already are."

"I said *go*, asshole," Cat growled, taking a menacing step forward. "I'm not going. Fuck off. Go."

I stared at him hard for a few seconds, impotent rage making me want to shake him and drag him out of there. Why was he *willingly* staying in here?

In the end, though, I had to make the decision. "Fine," I gritted. "You're being a fucking moron. Good luck."

I heard him exhale a weary sound. "Be safe," he muttered, like all the fight had left him.

Guilt and regret stabbed me as Wyn, Charlie and I made our way down to the main floor, ignoring the other fighters banging on their cell doors, screaming at us. At least the guards were still unconscious, but even if they weren't, Wyn had basically hogtied them so they wouldn't be getting free for a while.

We had until the fight that was currently taking place ended to get away. I assumed, eventually, the monsters would find a way to get in when the guards didn't show up to let them into the cell block to collect their fighters. Hopefully we'd have at least some distance between us when that happened, but I couldn't imagine the monsters or the fightmaster cancelling the rest of the night's fights to go hunting for us. I just had to pray I was right, and that we wouldn't end up with an endless sea of monsters chasing us in the dark within the hour.

The Soul Eater produced a set of keys he'd already snagged from one of the guards and opened the first set of doors. The building was quiet inside as we made our way through the corridors, but the sounds of cheering and shouting echoed from the fighting arena outside. At one point I could have sworn I could even hear the meaty smacks of fighters' fists connecting with flesh.

"Shit, what about the monster outside the front door?" I hissed to Wyn as we approached the lobby.

He shook his hood. "Watching the fights," he murmured back. "There's no one out front except maybe for stragglers—other monsters who won't pay us any attention if we're quick and quiet."

He was right. The front of the building was quiet as we stepped outside, both the guard and the monster who manned the signing up table gone. Guess none of them were willing to forgo watching humans being forced to beat the shit out of each other.

"Edin and Danny are waiting for us away from the building," Wyn told us in a low voice, striding away towards the darkness that crept up on the edges of the floodlights illuminating the arena.

Charlie and I followed him silently. I was so tense it felt like my legs would snap, my right leg as stiff as my prosthetic. We got clear of the building, but that meant we were more exposed to the edges of the bleachers that surrounded the makeshift arena—what had once been the yard—at the back. It sounded like the fight taking place was brutal, though, so the crowd was no doubt transfixed. We just had to get out of the glow cast by the floodlights and I'd feel a little safer—even though I wouldn't relax until we were miles from this place.

"Shit." Charlie was pale when I immediately turned at the sound of his tight voice. I darted my gaze around, expecting a monster to already be lunging towards us. "Three o'clock," he whispered. "You see them?"

I swung my gaze in the direction he indicated and froze. A group of men were clustered together behind the cobbled together bleachers that circled the arena, lit up by the floodlights illuminating the backside of the prison building. A man in simple clothing—jeans and an old sweatshirt, with a baseball bat pulled lower over his head—was saying something to three other men in civilian clothing. But something about him was… familiar.

When he lifted his head and glanced around furtively, my breath caught.

“It’s Lieutenant Mallory,” Charlie muttered. “And I recognise one of the others, that’s—"

Whatever he’d been about to say was lost as the Soul Eater appeared out of nowhere and grabbed the front of Charlie’s shirt. “What did you say?” His voice was a low, inhuman snarl. “Where is he?” He shook Charlie roughly. “Show me.”

“Hey,” I hissed, my heart hammering because I knew what Wyn wanted. I knew what was going to happen. Still, I lunged forward to try and pull Wyn off of Charlie. I couldn’t move him an inch.

Charlie’s throat bobbed as he swallowed, grey eyes bright but hard as he stared at the Soul Eater in front of him. I could see the fear in his gaze, but he shoved it back. “Why?”

“I don’t have time for these fucking games,” Wyn snarled, shaking him again, completely ignoring me as I heaved on his arm, still trying to make him let go. “Show me Mallory. Now. *Show me*,” he snarled in a voice so totally inhuman and demonic that I jerked my hands away from his arm in an automatic, instinctive reaction.

Wyn’s hood snapped up and to the right, towards the group of men. Heart hammering, I followed his gaze and saw Mallory showing off something in his hands. I squinted at it. It looked like a dagger, with a black blade and pale, intricately carved handle.

“Is that him.” Wyn’s voice was low and shaking with barely controlled rage.

I quickly scanned the man again, and when he looked over to speak to one of his companions, a smirk on his thin face, I knew with certainty that it was Mallory.

Charlie remained silent, though, jaw ticking as he stared mutely back at the Soul Eater. He didn’t know any of it, so he wasn’t going to reveal that kind of information to a monster—even one that had just helped him escape a prison. But I could see the tension spreading through Wyn’s frame. I could feel the unfathomable rage coursing through his veins at the thought of the man who’d tortured his lover being this close and getting away again.

So I answered instead, my voice unsteady. “That’s him.”

I was mainly worried that Wyn would get so furious with Charlie that he’d kill him out of rage for letting Mallory get away. But I also—perhaps perversely—wanted Mallory to get what he deserved. I saw Charlie shoot

me a shocked look before he schooled his features. I'd explain to him later, when we had time.

Wyn was already gone. In a streak of oily black smoke, he had crossed the distance between us and the group of plain-clothed military officers—no doubt trying to keep a low profile here—and appeared just behind Mallory.

One of the other officers noticed him first, and let out a weak, terrified sound before scrambling away. The three other men followed, but Mallory didn't have time. I saw Wyn rip off the lieutenant's hat and snatch a fistful of hair on the back of his head to yank it back painfully hard. At the same time, he reached down and slipped the dagger out of Mallory's suddenly lax grip before it vanished under the back of his coat.

Using his grip on Mallory's short hair, Wyn began to drag the lieutenant away from the edge of the arena, back towards us. Mallory's face twisted in agony as he reached up, trying to claw Wyn's fingers off him, but he couldn't. He lost his footing and cried out in pain when Wyn didn't stop walking, easily dragging the lieutenant's wriggling body across the ground by the grip in his hair.

Charlie made a horrified sound and took a step forward as Wyn approached, but I stopped him with a tight grip on his shoulder that I then used to push him forward, keeping up with Wyn but out his way. Mallory reached down and started fumbling for the waistband of his jeans, but his shaking fingers dropped the handgun he was trying to grab moments after he managed to pull it out. Feeling more like a raider than a soldier, I bent and scooped it up without even breaking my stride, blindly checking the safety and tucking it in the back of my pants.

"What exactly were you planning to do with my dagger?" Wyn rasped, the sound of his inhuman voice sending chills up my spine as I forced us to keep up. It was pitch black beyond the prison's floodlights, and the last thing I wanted was to get lost and not be able to find Edin.

Mallory's breath choked on a gasp at the sound of that ghoulish voice, mouth opening and closing like a dying fish as he stared up at the night sky with wide, unblinking eyes, still weakly scrambling to try and get free. "I—I—"

"I'll forgive you for stealing it, human," Wyn crooned, blackened fingers clenching painfully tight in the lieutenant's hair as he dragged him across the ground, a faint fog of dust kicking up from the dry earth in his wake. "Don't worry. But," his voice dropped, softening, becoming even more

terrifying, “there is one thing I cannot forgive you for. Do you know what that is?”

Mallory choked again on another terror-soaked sound. “I don’t—I w-was only acting on orders—”

Edin and Danny appeared, melting out of the darkness. My chest eased with relief at the sight of Edin’s big body, his lavender skin gleaming in the faint light from the prison, as he strode towards me. I hurried to meet him, dragging a dazed Charlie with me.

“Wyn, what the hell are you—” Danny’s voice was horrified at first, but he cut himself short when he no doubt spotted the lieutenant himself.

Edin reached me and cupped the side of my neck for a brief moment, before Wyn’s furious, deathly voice forced us all to look his way.

“Get on your knees.” Wyn used his grip to drag the lieutenant up until he scrambled to his knees. Mallory’s chest was heaving, face shiny with sweat and so pale he almost looked grey. Wyn readjusted his too-tight grip in the lieutenant’s hair, forcing Mallory’s head up and forward.

Towards Danny.

“Do you see him?” Wyn hissed, voice trembling with rage. “Look at him. I want him to be the last thing you see. *Look at him.*”

Danny was trembling beside me, frozen as he stared back. His headgear wasn’t on, clutched in his fist instead, so the panicked, traumatised expression haunting his features was all too visible. I wanted to reach out and grip his shoulder in comfort, but didn’t dare. Charlie made a move beside me, as if he wanted to do something to stop this, but I stopped him with a hand to the chest, shaking my head without even looking over at him.

Mallory’s eyes were wide and shiny with fear as he gazed towards Danny. His body was shaking so violently it almost looked like he was having a seizure. A small part of me wondered if he could even really see Danny. If he could even process what Wyn was saying, or if he was too petrified to take in any of it.

Wyn squatted down beside Mallory and murmured something in his ear, too quiet for the rest of us to hear over the sounds of the fights roaring from nearby. A wet patch started to spread on the front of the lieutenant’s pants. His mouth went lax with terror, face draining even more until he already looked like a corpse.

Wyn stood back up and strode forward a step. “You don’t have to watch, Danny,” he said, but his voice was still hard. He was too angry. Too hyper-focused on finally being able to exact his revenge for his lover.

I didn’t look to see if Danny turned away. I was transfixed with morbid curiosity as Wyn turned to face Mallory and raised a leg to boot him in the face. The lieutenant let out a pained sound and flew back, gasping shallow breaths, blood spurting from his crushed nose. Wyn stepped over his body and stared down at him, looming over Mallory’s prone form like a demon.

He crouched and pulled the dagger back out from his lower back under his coat, deftly flipping it in his fingers so the tip of the blade pointed down, at Mallory’s chest. He cut swiftly through the lieutenant’s shirt.

“This won’t be quick,” Wyn told him in a blunt voice.

Then he lowered the blade to the lieutenant’s chest.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Charlie flinch from the screams. But I forced myself to watch, knowing what Mallory had done. Knowing he was getting what he deserved. I did finally reach out and grip Danny’s shoulder, feeling his body thrumming with tension beneath my grip. From behind me, I felt Edin’s big hand land on my shoulder, and I blindly reached out with my free one to tangle my fingers with his, needing the comfort of his touch in a way I never, ever had before, with anyone.

By the time Wyn was nearly done, Mallory’s screams had devolved into hysterical sobs and moans of agony. The sounds were almost drowned out by the feral barks and calls coming from the crowd watching the fights nearby, the floodlights casting just enough light from this distance for my human eyes to see what was happening.

Mallory started babbling, pleading as Wyn finished with whatever he’d carved into the lieutenant’s chest and moved the dagger down to the lieutenant’s left hand, hovering it over the tip of Mallory’s pinky finger.

“I hear fingers hurt worse than other body parts being cut off,” Wyn said in a low voice, and sank the blade in a second later.

By the time he got to the last finger on the lieutenant’s other hand, Mallory was gurgling with agony, twitching beneath Wyn’s crouching form. There was so much blood. I didn’t realise there would be that much from those kinds of wounds, but it just kept pumping weakly from each of the stumps where Mallory’s fingers had been.

I got the feeling Wyn would have carried on. Would have done far, far worse to Mallory if Danny hadn’t been there. But he knew as well as I did

that Danny wouldn’t react well to witnessing more drawn-out torture, even if it was on the man who had tortured *him*. Who had *branded* him.

Wyn whispered something else down at the shivering, bleeding lieutenant, something that made him moan out a weak, pathetic sound. Then the Soul Eater drew the blade of his dagger slowly over Mallory’s throat. Blood bubbled out, thick and dark, moving slower than it would have been if Mallory hadn’t already lost so much. It didn’t take long for him to die, but it felt like an eternity. Only when he had gone still, his body seeming to shrink, did Wyn wipe his blade clean on the lieutenant’s clothes and stand back up.

I let go of Danny’s shoulder as Wyn started walking towards him. Danny was shaking, but he moved forward to meet Wyn halfway and wrapped his arms around him, burying his face in the Soul Eater’s throat under his hood. Wyn murmured something in his ear, and suddenly the moment was too private to keep watching. I squeezed Edin’s hand once before letting go and turning to face him and Charlie.

“We have to move,” I told them, then glanced back at Danny and Wyn. “Should we…”

“They will come.” Edin nodded. “You’re right, we must leave before the fight ends and the guards are found. Let’s go.”

“What—” Charlie sounded dazed and horrified, but we didn’t have time for it.

I gripped his shoulder and propelled him forward. “I’ll explain it all when we’re away from here,” I told him. “Move.” I gave him a gentle shove towards Edin, who steadied him and directed him away from the prison building.

Danny and Wyn broke apart, Danny nodding at something the Soul Eater said. He still looked pale and shaken, but at least his eyes weren’t quite so vacantly haunted. They linked hands and followed behind Edin and Charlie, but I found myself taking a hesitant step closer to Mallory’s body.

Feeling vaguely ill, I looked down at it. There was so much blood, surrounding him in a dark, sticky outline. It had run down the sides of his neck to pool under his head and shoulders, so I could still see the word Wyn had carved into his chest with painstaking precision.

MONSTER.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

We walked in silence in the dark for a long time. I assumed Charlie and Danny were as blind as I was, but we had no lights and wouldn't have wanted to risk giving ourselves away in case anyone came after us, anyway. Edin let me cling onto his hand, guiding me as I kept a firm grip with my other hand around Charlie's wrist. He was still dazed, and I was pretty sure he was in mild shock from everything that had happened.

Danny and Wyn were walking ahead of us, fingers linked and heads bent close together as they talked quietly to each other.

Eventually, Wyn's hood turned to look back at us over his shoulder. "I think we're safe now. If you want to stop and rest."

Edin immediately stopped and turned to face me, pulling off my backpack still slung over his bulging shoulder. "Do you need water? Food? Are you hurt anywhere from your fight?"

I shook my head. "I'm good, scratch. I think Charlie needs some water, though. And maybe to sit down for a minute."

"I'm fine," Charlie said automatically, but I could hear the vacant tone in his voice. I forced my canteen on him so he would drink, at least. His bag, and therefore all his supplies, were long gone. I doubted the kolebs kept hold of it for very long.

Danny and Wyn had stopped too, and they approached as Edin handed me my cap and mask. I shot him a grateful smile and pulled them both on, readjusting the bill until it felt comfortable.

"Hey. Charlie." Danny stepped forward and held out his hand. "I'm Danny. Glad to see you safe."

Charlie stopped drinking and swallowed hurriedly, almost choking as he nodded. "Sorry," he said sheepishly as he wiped the back of his wrist over his mouth and shook Danny's hand with his free one. "Thanks. And uh… I… Thanks for your help," he directed at the Soul Eater, sounding confused about how he should treat the looming, ghoulish monster.

"Fine," Wyn said shortly, and I saw Charlie try to hide the visceral reaction he had to the Soul Eater's voice.

Danny nodded at the cuff on Charlie's wrist. "Wonder if we've got a way to get those off you two."

“I have the key for Hunter’s.” Edin stepped forward and reached up to the back of his neck. He untied the leather knot at his nape and carefully threaded the tiny key, which I hadn’t even noticed was on there, off the worn strap. He unlocked my cuff, and after thanking him I rubbed my wrist and watched as he deftly retied the leather around his neck, my eyes drifting to the oddly shaped pendant that gleamed faintly in the low moonlight.

“What about Charlie’s?” Danny asked, and Charlie waved his hand before passing me back the canteen.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “We can sort it later.”

“I can do it.” Edin stepped forward and snapped the cuff off in a second, reminding me of his sheer brute strength. The adrenaline was wearing off, leaving me shaky, but it was also making me start to anticipate what would happen when we got somewhere safe to rest. I could sleep, eat, and then Edin and I could fuck for as long as we wanted without having to worry about anything.

Fuck. It hit me for the first time. We’d *done it*.

I hid my grin by taking a long gulp of water, then shoved my canteen and both the cuffs into my bag. I didn’t particularly want to keep them, but it didn’t make sense to drop them on the ground and leave them as evidence that we’d come this way, just in case anyone *did* come looking for us. I thought about the hulking lover of the fightmaster. I had the feeling that he would chase us to the ends of the earth if it was what she wanted.

We just had to hope she wasn’t that bothered about losing a couple of fighters—new ones at that. She had plenty.

“Here.” I looked up to see Danny holding out my gun holster and shotgun. “Shells are still in your bag.”

“Thanks, man.” I took it gratefully, then remembered the handgun Mallory had dropped, tucked in the back of my pants. “Charlie.” It took him a few seconds to respond, blinking at me in the darkness. “Handgun or shotgun? Your choice. I’m guessing they took that dagger off you at the prison?”

It took him another second or two to react, but then he nodded. “Yeah, they took it. Sorry, I—I’m a little spacey. I’ll be fine in a little while.”

“Hey, it’s cool.” I felt self-conscious because Edin, Danny and Wyn were silently watching us, and I knew Charlie wouldn’t want to appear weak in front of strangers—especially when two of them were monsters.

“Shotgun or handgun?” I repeated, keeping my voice casual, like everything was normal.

“Uh… I… Handgun.”

I checked the safety again and handed it over to him, then fixed the holster over my shoulder and holstered the shotgun. It felt good to have the weight of it under my backpack, pressing between my shoulder blades again.

“So where do we go?” I asked, putting my hands on my hips and looking at Edin. A sharp, sweet ache flared in my chest at just the sight of him. That big strong body. The tail flicking behind him with its deadly tip. The proud arch of his horns. I’d be indebted to him forever for what he’d done. And I had to make sure Charlie knew it, too, when he was in a condition to handle hearing everything. He needed to know the lengths that this big purple monster, who didn’t even know him, had gone to, all to get him back safe.

“I know somewhere not too far,” Edin said. “A few hours’ walk, but it is remote. We’re unlikely to come across anyone on the way or be disturbed once we’re there. We’ll be safe.”

I nodded. “That sounds great. I think Charlie will need to rest for a couple days, right buddy?” I nudged him with my elbow, and Charlie shot me a weak smile. He was still pale. It looked even more stark against the unfamiliar dark mess of his straggly beard.

“So will you,” Edin rumbled, voice stern as he folded his big arms over his chest and raised an imperious brow at me. I refused to acknowledge the heat that curled low in my belly in reaction to his bossiness. “You must rest, Hunter.”

I waved his comment off. “I’m fine. Let’s get moving.” I looked over at Danny and Wyn. “What are you guys doing?”

They looked at each other, having some unspoken conversation, before Danny leaned into Wyn and tangled their fingers back together. “We’re going to head off,” he said as the Soul Eater tugged him closer. “As long as you don’t need us anymore. Well, as long as you don’t need Wyn,” he added with a roll of his eyes.

I felt a small smile tug the corner of my mouth. “You helped too. A lot.” I exhaled. “Thank you—both of you. You don’t know how grateful I am.” I looked at Edin, making sure he knew I meant him too. He shot me a small smile.

“Hey, don’t mention it. It was great meeting you, Hunter.” Danny stepped forward and held out his hand, which I clasped. “Glad Charlie is safe. Shame we didn’t get to hang out more.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ll be able to—” I cut myself off, realising what I’d been about to say. *I’m sure we’ll be able to hang out again soon*.

No. We wouldn’t. Of course we wouldn’t. I’d never see Danny and Wyn again, because I’d be going back to the military.

The reminder just pushed an even more painful thought back to the forefront, the one that had been circling in my brain for days now. *You’re never going to see Edin again after this.*

I swallowed hard and let go of Danny’s hand, unable to shoot him even a small smile. “Yeah,” I croaked. “Thanks for all the MREs.”

“I put a couple in your bag,” Danny said, stepping back. Wyn cupped his shoulders from behind, looming over him like some protective demon. “Be safe when you and Charlie make your way back to Tennessee. And… just be safe in general.”

His tone made it clear that he absolutely did not trust the military, which was understandable as hell, and something I already knew all too well by this point. But acknowledging that Danny clearly thought going back was a bad decision—even if he wasn’t saying it out loud—made the doubt that had been niggling in my gut rear its ugly head again.

I pushed it aside and nodded at Danny. “We will. Thanks. And… uh… thanks, Wyn.” I felt awkward addressing him directly, but I wasn’t going to be so much of an asshole that I didn’t thank him. We wouldn’t have got out of there if it wasn’t for him. Hell, we wouldn’t have even found out about the fighting ring if it wasn’t for him.

His hood dipped once in a brief nod. “You’re welcome.”

Then Danny looked at Edin, and a big smile broke out over his handsome face. “Gonna miss you, big guy.”

They both stepped forward at the same time, and I watched as Edin gave Danny a huge hug, lifting him clear off his feet. Danny let out a choked laugh, patting Edin’s wide shoulder with one hand while the other kept his baseball bat out of the way. “Come visit us soon, yeah?”

Edin put him back down gently and nodded. “Yes. I am sure I will,” he rumbled out, reaching out to ruffle Danny’s hair and snickering when Danny jerked his head back to try and get away, cheeks going red.

My throat closed up. *I*, Edin had said. Not *we*. Edin would be alone again.

I swallowed thickly as I watched Edin step up to the Soul Eater. They embraced loosely in a way that was clearly familiar, temples close as they murmured to each other in low voices. Wyn rested long, blackened fingers briefly on Edin's shoulder as they parted, and a moment later I felt his cool gaze on me from beneath his hood. It wasn't anger I could feel in his gaze, but something that still made me want to squirm.

I looked away, restless, readjusting the straps of my backpack and checking over Charlie even though I didn't need to. When Danny and Wyn finally started walking away with one last wave, I turned to Edin with an expectant look, eager to get moving. My stump was starting to throb, I hadn't showered in days, and the longer I stood still, the more the exhaustion started making everything feel too heavy. The sore spots on my body and jaw where the other fighter had managed to land a couple of substantial punches were more of an irritant than a hinderance, but the entire night had exhausted me. I had to keep the momentum up before I crashed.

"Ready, scratch?" I asked, then turned to pat Charlie's shoulder. "Come on, champ. Just a few more hours, then you can rest."

He nodded, still pale and glassy eyed. I felt Edin's tail brush my leg as he stepped closer, and I reached over and smoothed my hand down his side before we started walking.

And walking.

Charlie looked as shit as I felt by the time Edin told us we had reached the place. Edin's *a few hours* was actually five. We were both dead on our feet, and I could barely lift my boots to keep moving forward as we trudged up a long dirt road that wove between trees so big and heavy they drooped over us, creating a dark canopy.

A house came into view, looming up ahead, nothing more than a black outline against the star-studded sky. The only sounds were the rustling of the trees and the faint crunch of our boots on the dry dirt road beneath us.

Edin was practically keeping me upright as we approached the house, and Charlie was leaning heavily on me, dragging his feet. The house was

still and silent when Edin pushed open the front door and stepped inside, the dust already making me want to sneeze. It was dark, and I wasn't interested in looking around. I needed to sleep, badly.

Edin seemed to understand, because he led us straight upstairs. We deposited Charlie in the first room at the end of the hall, and he shot us a tired nod and a "thanks" before collapsing onto the bed in a cloud of dust that mushroomed into the air, visible in the weak moonlight coming through the dirty window.

Wrapping his big arm around my shoulders, Edin led me out of the room. I rested my cheek on his shoulder as we walked all the way to the other end of the long hallway. I was vaguely aware of wooden floors, a big room that would have been airy if the window had been open and it wasn't full of dust. There was a huge bed directly opposite the door against the centre of the far wall, and just the sight of it made me want to cry.

Edin let go of me to strip the top sheet off the bed. "There are blankets in a cupboard. I have seen them before," he said. "I will get you one."

I shook my head, blindly stumbling forward and twisting my fingers with his. "This is fine, scratch. I'm okay." I sat heavily on the side of the bed.

Edin knelt in front of me and gently took off my boots and socks. I managed to lift my hips for him to pull down my pants as I yanked off my hat and mask, dropping them carelessly beside the bed. Then Edin was easing off my backpack, gun holster and shirt.

"Will you take my prosthetic off, scratch?" I mumbled, my eyes closed, body swaying. I was seconds away from oblivion.

"Yes, Hunter." Edin's voice was a low, soothing rumble that made me want to slip even deeper into the sleep luring me. I sighed, tension leaving me, and reached out blindly to run my fingers through his hair. My hand bumped his horn as he lowered his head, concentrating on figuring out how to remove my prosthetic.

I felt the jagged edges of the snapped one, and my chest hurt. "Did I ever say sorry?" I managed to get out. "For your horn getting broken?"

Edin went still, then snorted softly as he eased off my prosthetic. "That wasn't your fault, josdo."

"Yes it was." To my mortification, my chin trembled and my eyes got hot under my eyelids. I refused to open them.

Edin eased off the sock over my stump and cupped my leg, behind my knee. “No.” He dropped a kiss on my knee. “Now sleep. No more thinking.”

As he helped me back onto the bed, getting me settled, my body was already obeying him.

I still couldn’t believe we had done it. We’d gotten Charlie back, just like Edin had said we would all along. God, I wanted to tell him how grateful I was. How much I had needed him over the last couple of weeks. I wasn’t a big talker, never had been, but there was suddenly so much I wanted to *say* to him.

What if he’s already gone when you wake up?

The sharp, intrusive thought made my gritty, heavy eyes jerk open, my breath catching as shards of fear stabbed through me.

“Don’t leave,” I croaked, only half in control of what I was saying or doing anymore, delirious with exhaustion. I reached out to fumble with Edin’s kilt, twisting my fingers in the fabric.

I felt Edin’s big hand cup the side of my face, his thumb smoothing down my scar, but I was too tired to jerk away from the touch. It actually felt nice. Soothing.

“I won’t leave, Hunter,” Edin told me, voice so deep I felt it in my belly. “I will be here as long as you want me.”

My body finally relaxed, and I passed out, still clutching onto him.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I slept for almost two solid days, waking only to gulp down some water and use the bathroom. I asked after Charlie at one point when I woke up, and Edin told me he was basically doing the same that I was.

Every time I drifted back into that half-awake state, my first thoughts were always a carousel of worries. That Edin had left. That we hadn't really gotten Charlie out. That Edin and I were still in the tunnels with a mortik about to lunge at us from the darkness, or I was still asleep in my shitty cell at the prison, about to wake up for my first fight.

When I woke up yet again and wasn't immediately dogged by unrelenting exhaustion and the overwhelming need to go back to sleep, the room was light and I could hear birds outside the dirty window. It had once been such a mundane sound to wake up to. This had been a totally normal situation when I was a young kid—waking up in a soft bed, in a quiet house, with the sounds of nature drifting in from outside. The only thing missing was the buzzing drone of a neighbour mowing their lawn.

But that hadn't been normal for a very long time. So I lay there for a few seconds, staring up at the ceiling, something like slow panic meandering through my chest. If everything was this calm, this peaceful, surely that meant something was wrong. Or something was *about* to go wrong. Life wasn't like this anymore.

I lurched upright in the bed, my head swimming, just as the door opened and Edin stepped inside.

His face lit up when he saw me. "Josdo, you're awake." He strode to the bed and sat on the edge, reaching over to cup my face in his big hands. "How do you feel? You look better. Less pale." A thumb gently smoothed over the delicate skin under my eye. "Your eyes aren't so shadowed."

"Hi, scratch." My voice was hoarse and rough with sleep as I turned my cheek into his palm, unable to stop myself from nuzzling his warm skin and breathing in his wood and leather scent, beyond relieved that he was still here. "I feel good."

I started leaning forward, wanting to be closer to him, but froze when the scent of stale sweat drifted up. I wrinkled my nose. "But shit, I need a shower."

Edin grinned and stroke my cheekbone with his thumb before dropping his hands. “The water pipes work, but there is no hot water here, josdo. No power. But I have been heating water for you on the fire, for a bath. Shall I bring it up?”

A faint hint of worry twisted my gut for a brief moment at the thought of no electricity, but it was gone again in a moment. Charlie and I had been in these situations before, and we knew survival techniques. We’d be fine.

Besides, we also had a big, beautiful, insanely strong monster around to help with things—like carrying heavy buckets of heated water. “Sweet Jesus, yes. Please,” I told him in a croak. “God, I want to kiss you so bad.”

Edin boomed out a big laugh. “Why don’t you then?”

I shook my head. “I stink, and I haven’t brushed my teeth in way too long. When I’m clean, I’m going to kiss the shit out of you, scratch.”

“Mm.” Edin stood up from the bed. “Stay in bed, josdo, while I fill the bath. I have cleaned it already.”

“If Charlie’s awake, I’m going to go check on him,” I said, scooting out from under musty blankets Edin had covered me with at some point. I grabbed my backpack from beside the bed and pulled out a clean sock for my stump, but hesitated. I hadn’t been able to wash my stump for a couple of days now. I would rather do that first, and clean my prosthetic socket, before I put it back on.

I hesitated, my neck and face flushing. “Will you… I don’t want to put this on just for a few minutes. Would you be able to help me to Charlie’s room?” I asked Edin, grabbing my sweats instead and wriggling into them, tying a quick knot in the loose fabric below my stump so it didn’t flap about.

He nodded straight away and waited patiently for me to stand up from the bed. I wobbled for only a second, a little woozy from being horizontal for so many hours. I grabbed my backpack from the bed and slung it over my shoulder, remembering the clean clothes I’d stashed for Charlie back in South Dakota.

It wasn’t that I couldn’t get around fine by myself on one leg, but I was lightheaded from a lack of food, and it was easier with Edin helping me. And I knew he wasn’t judging me, so the awkwardness fled quickly as we made our way down the long hallway to Charlie’s room.

The house looked big in the daylight. The floors were solid wood, pale and dry, a little warped in some places. Sunlight streamed in through big

dirty windows at the end of the hallway, showing off the bubbled, once-white paint that had faded to a tobacco-stained yellow. Dust motes floated lazily, but Edin had opened the window at some point, and a cool breeze drifted in, sending them swirling upward in a flurry.

The place *was* big. There were several doors leading off the hallway, but I had a vague memory of leaving Charlie in the one at the far end of the hall before passing out myself.

"Have you spoken to him much?" I asked Edin as we walked.

I glanced over at him and saw his lips twitch. "No. He doesn't seem to like me much. He is very wary. And a little protective of you, I think." He shot me a crooked smile that showed a hint of fang.

My chest went all hot at the familiar sight. "He'll warm up to you when he knows you better." I bumped my shoulder gently into his side. "He hasn't had time to get used to your arrogant ass like I have, scratch."

Edin chuckled. "Perhaps."

We reached Charlie's door. I knocked, two sharp raps, and leaned my weight against the door frame so Edin could step back.

He dropped a kiss on the back of my head. "I will start filling the bath," he said, before ambling off towards the stairs.

Charlie opened the door a few seconds later, looking sleep-mussed. "Hey," he croaked, reaching up and running his fingers through his beard with a grimace.

"How you feeling?" I hopped into the room, Charlie steadying me with a firm grip on my bicep as I passed him. I reached the bed and dropped my backpack onto the twisted up sheets before turning to sit down on the edge. "Sleep okay?"

Charlie nodded, wandering over to the window as he rubbed his face. He still had a crease down his left cheek from the sheets. "Yeah. Haven't slept that much in my life."

I chuckled. "Me neither," I said, watching as he unlatched the window. The frames were old and wooden, and had once been painted white. The window screeched as Charlie forced it up, but it wouldn't stick. He grabbed an old, terracotta plant pot from the window sill, its former occupant nothing more than dried up, black strands hanging limp and sad over the edges, and wedged it in the frame to keep the window open. Outside, the sky was blindingly blue and clear.

I heard Edin tromping back up the stairs, his footfalls a little slower than usual as he carried up water for a bath. Something hot and sweet pulsed in my chest. He was so… good. Kind. Had I ever told him that? Had I ever said the words?

I cleared my throat and forced my attention back to Charlie. “Brought you some clothes,” I told him, reaching into my backpack and pulling out the pants, underwear, socks, and a couple of shirts that I’d grabbed from the apartments back in South Dakota. It had been weird at first, wearing other people’s old underwear. But I’d washed them, even though they were already clean, and honestly, it was better than the other options.

“You’re the best, man,” Charlie said, coming over to the bed and taking the pile gratefully. “I would kill for a shower.”

“No hot water, Edin said. He’s heated some up for me for a bath, but I don’t know how much there is. Once I’m out, I’ll heat some up for you too.” I wasn’t going to make Edin do it. He wasn’t a goddamn servant, and he’d done more than enough already.

Charlie was shaking his head. “I can do it.”

I spotted the MREs Danny had put in my bag, and pulled one out. “Here.”

Charlie’s lips quirked as he took it. “Never thought I’d be happy to see one of these.”

“Yeah.” I remembered the sugar packets I’d saved from the others I’d eaten, so pulled them out as well. “Saved these for you, too.”

Charlie chuckled as he took them, the sound dry and rough, like he hadn’t done it for a while. “Thanks.” He stared down at the MRE. “Where’d you get this? Thought we’d got through all of ours well before we left Minnesota.”

“Danny gave them to me. The guy last night, who was with the Soul Eater.”

“Oh.” Charlie looked weirded out. “Yeah. What… what was with that? Was he… You mean he’s *with* the Soul Eater?”

“Yes.” My voice came out more defensive than I’d meant it to, but Charlie’s expression and tone suggested he found the idea of a human and a monster together… repugnant.

“What the fuck?” Charlie hissed. “The Soul Eater’s a fucking serial killer. How the hell could that guy *be* with him?”

The tight knot that had twisted in my gut eased just a little. “He’s not a serial killer. Not exactly. It’s hard to explain—there’s a lot to tell you, man. But I think it’ll be better to wait until we’ve both washed up and eaten something substantial.”

“Jesus.” Charlie sank down beside me on the bed, wiping a hand down his tired face. “Okay. Sure. The most notorious monster in the country just helped me break out of an underground fighting ring in the Wastes, but there’s apparently more to tell me. Awesome.”

I nudged his arm. “Relax. It’s all good now, right? You’re out of there. Away from the behamots and kolebs.”

“Is that what they were called?” Charlie shook his head, already looking exhausted again. “So how did that guy—Danny—get hold of MREs?”

I hesitated, wondering how much to share with Charlie right now, knowing it would bring on a slew of other difficult questions. In the end, I just said, “Wyn—the Soul Eater—snuck into a base and stole some for him.”

“Of course he did.”

My automatic reaction was, weirdly, to defend the Soul Eater. I’d witnessed how deeply he loved Danny. How he would do anything for him. The military had more than enough provisions. If Wyn wanted to take a couple of MREs for Danny, who had to survive out here in the Wastes, scavenging for everything, then he should fucking take them.

I had to remind myself that Charlie knew none of it. “Got something else you’ll like,” I said to move us on from the topic. I dipped my hand into my backpack and pulled out the electric razor. I clicked it on for a second to show that it had some charge, ready and waiting for Charlie to get rid of that patchy mess on his face. He’d never been able to grow a good beard.

I’d given my face a quick buzz the morning before we’d reached the prison, so my stubble was manageable for the time being. If there was no power here, it’d be useless after the charge ran out. I’d have to think of another way to shave until we left.

“Fuck, I could kiss you.” Charlie grabbed the razor. I chuckled, looking up as he headed for the old mirror propped up on the chest drawers, and saw Edin standing in the doorway.

His brows were pulled into a slight frown, and he was gripping the doorframe with one big hand. “The bath is ready, Hunter.”

His deep voice was quiet, but Charlie still jumped when he spoke. He turned to eye Edin with a closed off, wary expression.

Time to sort that shit out. “Thanks, scratch,” I said, then stood up, hopping once to find my balance. “I don’t think you two were introduced properly. Charlie, this is Edin. We wouldn’t have been able to get you back without him.” I smiled at Edin, and he gave me a small smile back.

Charlie nodded once, but he was still watching Edin with the same expression. “Thank you.”

Edin inclined his head in a graceful nod, but said nothing. Tense, awkward silence filled the room.

“Well, I’ll go wash up.” I picked up my bag and hopped towards the door. Edin met me halfway, slipping his big warm arm around my back.

Charlie was watching us with a tight expression, mouth pinched beneath the wild, too-long hair of his moustache. Then he gave me a clipped nod and turned to the mirror, effectively blocking out any more conversation by clicking on the razor and lifting it to his face.

I didn’t want to leave him with this weird atmosphere. Why was he suddenly so tense? Did he really not trust Edin that much? I’d never thought Charlie was particularly prejudiced about monsters. I’d always thought his views had been the same as mine—that it was preferable to leave them alone, but if they attacked first, we would defend ourselves. We’d always acknowledged that there were monster species as intelligent—if not more so—than humans, unlike some others in the military who acted as though they were all mindless animals.

I’d only just got him back, and it was already weird. I cast about for something to say that would lighten the tension suddenly weighing down the air in the room.

“I shaved my balls with that,” I went with in the end as Edin and I reached the door, just to fuck with him.

Charlie froze, grey eyes meeting mine in his reflection in the mirror. After a second, he relaxed and carried on shaving. “Fucker,” I heard him say. I snickered as Edin and I stepped into the hall.

The big, purple monster’s frame was a little tense as we made our way back to our room. We stepped back into the bedroom, but before I could ask if he was okay, he blurted out, “He is jealous.”

I froze, staring at Edin incredulously as he closed the door behind him. “What? Jealous? Of what?”

“Of me, I think. He doesn’t like me.” Edin hesitated, his big purple eyes searching mine. “Does he… want you?”

I spluttered at that. “Jesus, *no*. We’re like brothers.”

A faint flush coloured Edin’s jutting cheekbones, and it made my heart melt even though I was confused by this whole conversation. “I heard him say he could kiss you,” Edin said, his voice gruff as he folded his big arms over his chest.

I rolled my eyes at that, part of me wanting to laugh. The other half of me wanted to grab Edin’s face and kiss him for being so fucking adorable. “It’s just an expression, scratch. He just meant he was really grateful that I gave him the razor so he could shave.”

“Mm.” Edin didn’t sound convinced, but he sighed and gestured towards the bathroom attached to the bedroom. “The water will cool quickly, josdo. Let’s get you in the bath.”

The prospect of sinking into warm, clean water was enough for me to drop the conversation, even though I wasn’t sure Edin was entirely convinced. But there had honestly never been even an inkling of attraction between Charlie and me, not even when we’d first met.

The bathroom was steamy despite Edin opening the window in there. The tub was one of those old-fashioned baths with claw feet. It looked sparkling clean, but the sink and toilet needed a scrub. I could do it later. Right now, I urgently needed to get this grime and sweat off my body.

But first, I grabbed my toothbrush and toothpaste from my bag to scrub my teeth clean, brushing them for a long time. I took a deep drink of water from the faucet, cupping my hand under the flow of cool water. When I turned towards the bath, Edin helped me strip off my sweats and underwear. Then he actually lifted me into the tub, which had me bristling automatically before I forced myself to calm down. It was actually kind of nice to be manhandled by someone bigger than me. In fact, it was… hot. Arousal curled low in my belly, my body waking up after days of being dormant.

“Ahhhh.” I couldn’t help but groan out a long, guttural sound as I sank into the water. “Fuck, that’s nice.”

Edin rumbled out a low sound that made my dick twitch, already conditioned to respond to that sexy noise. I rolled my head lazily on the lip of the tub to smirk at him. “What’s up, scratch?” I asked, before dipping my head under the water to scrub at my hair.

When I re-emerged, Edin was holding an old, wrapped bar of soap. He pulled the ripped paper off with surprisingly deft fingers, and I breathed in deeply as the clean scent of the soap reached my nose.

"You are beautiful, josdo," he told me in a rumbling voice as he handed it to me. "You make my cock so hard."

I felt myself go red even as I chuckled. My own dick perked up at his words, drifting against my inner thigh in the water as it started stiffening up. I quickly scrubbed my hair then lathered up my hands to wash my stump. I couldn't keep it submerged in water long, so after washing it I lay back down, slouching lower in the tub and hooking my left knee over the lip of the bath so my stump was out of the water. The air felt cool against the wet, warmed skin.

I scrubbed wet, soapy hands over my face, neck and behind my ears. As I blinked the water out of my eyes, I heard Edin let out that low rumble again. "And I love that I do the same for you."

My breath caught when Edin leaned closer, folding his muscular arms on the edge of the tub and resting his chin on them. His big eyes gleamed as he dragged them down my body and stopped at my cock. "Is that for me, josdo?"

I felt my dick jerk in the water at his words. Scraping my teeth over my lower lip, I nodded when he looked back up to meet my gaze with heavy lids.

"Mm." But instead of reaching for my cock, Edin took the soap out of my hands and lathered up. I couldn't stop the blissed out moan that left me a moment later when big, warm, soapy hands slid down my neck and over my chest.

I turned into putty as Edin washed every inch of me he could reach, trying not to flinch away from the ticklish feel of his fingers soaping up my armpits. I wasn't able to hold back the jolt when slippery fingertips stroked over my nipples, which were already tight thanks to the cooling air in the room. Edin tormented them for long moments, until I was panting, biting down on my lower lip, white-knuckling the sides of the tub. Shit, I'd never realised my nipples were so sensitive.

When Edin was done washing my upper body, he leaned forward and brushed his lips over my wet forehead. "Sit up on your knees," he told me, his voice low and raspy in the heat of the bathroom.

My cock was already throbbing, and I scrambled to comply embarrassingly fast, my stump splashing back into the water so I could twist round. The tub was a decent size, but it was still a tight fit for my big body. My right foot pressed against the side of the bath as I knelt, knees digging into the hard surface.

Leaving everything above mid-thigh exposed.

Edin lathered up again, and then big, soapy hands were splaying over my ass as he leaned in with a wolfish grin to kiss me. I couldn't help but moan into his mouth, clutching his hot shoulders. Edin's velvety tongue sank inside, curling around mine, making me dig my fingers in tighter.

When slippery fingers slid down my crack to circle my hole, I jerked with a shuddery moan. "Fuck, scratch."

Edin kissed me again with a low sound. "I love your body." He stroked me again, fingertips moving in tight, slippery little circles over my rim. I moaned and wrapped my arms around his neck, holding him to me as I let my knees slide open wider in the bath.

Edin made a sound of approval at the move. His fingers dipped lower, and I jerked when they stroked over my tight balls from behind. He cupped them briefly, then soaped them with movements that bordered on the very edge of rough, making me clench up with hot anticipation.

My cock was already leaking, bucking in the air when Edin's hands slid round to the fronts of my thighs. A hot, appreciative sound rumbled up from his chest as he broke the kiss and looked down. "So big and hard," he rumbled, lathering up his hands once again.

The breath left me in a rush when one hand grabbed my cock in an unyielding grip, while the other cupped my balls. Edin washed me thoroughly, which was… weird. I wasn't sure how to react, because if I was honest with myself, I found it insanely sexy. That he was taking care of me this way. The other half of me argued that I was being too passive. Too submissive.

But… I kind of liked submitting to Edin. Only Edin.

None of it mattered, anyway, when Edin ducked his head and I felt hot, wet suction engulf the head of my cock.

"Oh fuck," I breathed out shakily, threading my fingers through Edin's hair and looking down to watch as he took even more of my dick into his mouth. His velvety tongue stroked me, licking and tickling the shaft as he sucked.

“Mmm.” The low vibration made me grit my teeth and start to tremble. My nuts pulled up tighter, and Edin stroked his thumb over them in response, sending tortured bliss up the length of my shaft. He sucked hard, moaning again as he slid his wet lips back up before kissing the tip. He’d washed away the pre-cum, but more was already flowing in a constant stream. When he licked his lips and pulled the head of my dick back into his mouth for a wet, sucking kiss, I shuddered hard and jerked my hips forward, trying to get more of it back into his mouth.

Edin chuckled and pulled away, hands sliding up to wash my abs. I gritted my teeth to stop myself from begging for his mouth back on my cock, but my hips were still jutting forward, making it painfully obvious how close to the edge I already was. My cock was jerking with my heartbeat, the head wet and red and swollen. It was so stiff it felt like I could drill it through the enamel of the bath tub.

“Do you remember the promise I made you, josdo?” Edin sat back up to kiss me, strands of his deep purple hair slipping over his shoulder so the tips clung to my wet chest. “About what I would do once we were away from that place?”

Heat shot through me, tightening my sac even more, making goosebumps break out over every inch of my skin exposed to the rapidly cooling, steamy air in the room. “I remember,” I managed to croak when his mouth parted from mine.

And I couldn’t wait.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

My dick shot harder than steel when Edin literally lifted me out of the tub and carried me to the bed. It was surreal, being with someone actually bigger and stronger than me. Someone capable of lifting me and—I gulped at the thought—holding me down.

He deposited me on the bed and yanked off his boots with impatient jerks. My stomach lurched with anticipation when he loomed over me on all fours with a devilish grin that showed off his gleaming fangs. But I was full of energy now, restless and eager to show him how much I wanted him. So I scrambled up and pushed Edin's rock hard stomach until he got the hint and settled back against the headboard with a chuckle.

I climbed into his lap, straddling him, and wrapped my arms around his neck as I kissed him with a low moan. When my hard dick jerked between us and brushed his tense abs, I moaned low again and grazed my teeth over his lower lip.

Edin grunted, fingers splayed over my bare ass, kneading restlessly. "Let me get you ready, josdo," he rumbled against my mouth. I jerked when his fangs gently teased my lower lip. "I need to get inside you."

"Mmm." Shit, that sounded good. But there was something I wanted to do first. "Not yet," I told him, my voice already raspy with arousal.

A slow, wolfish grin spread over Edin's handsome face as I shuffled back, lowering my head to drop a kiss between his huge pecs. Then another above his navel. He lifted his hips to help as I dragged his kilt down, his tail pulling itself free. My gut tightened with excitement when he trailed that dangerously sharp tip along the length of my thigh.

But a second later I was distracted as his huge cock sprang up and slapped his abs. *Fuck*. I'd forgotten how big he was. My mouth watered, and I slid my hands up his inner thighs, pushing them apart. His knees fell open wide as I leaned down and swirled my tongue over that tantalising little V under the head of his cock.

Edin growled, his cock jerking against my mouth. I licked again as I fisted the base, tilting the length so I could suck on the tip. I grunted with arousal when the taste of salt hit my tongue, and Edin let out another shuddery growl from above. One big hand palmed the back of my head, not

pushing me down but just touching me, making me shiver. I moaned around his cock and slid lower, trying to fit as much of him into my mouth as I could. It was nowhere near as much as it had been when I'd been on my back, my throat able to open up so much easier then, so I stroked the bottom half in time with the bobbing of my head.

"Hunter," Edin groaned out, his deep voice breathless. His fingers shifted restlessly on the back of my head, hips stirring with tiny little thrusts to meet my mouth. I moaned low as I slid my mouth free, lifting my eyes to meet his as I glided my tongue all the way down his length. Edin's top lip peeled back from his fangs in a pleasured snarl as I licked and sucked his balls. They were so big and smooth. I wanted to grin in triumph when I felt them tighten beneath my tongue.

A second later, I let out a surprised grunt, my hips jerking when something slid between my spread knees from behind. I shuddered as it trailed over my balls and curled around my dick. I looked down, heart pounding, already panting before I saw Edin's tail spiralled up my length.

"Oh fuck," I rasped, voice trembling. It was freaky as hell, but I was into it. I was *definitely* into it, especially when Edin flexed his tail lightly, giving my reeling prick a gentle squeeze. My breath caught and I looked back up at Edin to see him grinning wickedly down at me.

"Does that feel good, Hunter?" he purred.

I swallowed and nodded, giving the sharp tip of his tail a wary glance, but Edin was being careful to keep it away from me. When the tail flexed again, undulating over my length, I let out a low groan and leaned back down to suck as much of Edin's cock into my mouth as I could. I sucked hard and fast, desperation controlling my actions now as sharp pleasure tingled through my nuts and up the length of my dick. I could feel pre-cum sliding down my tip, and I couldn't help but start grinding my hips as Edin's tail squeezed and moved, driving me crazy.

A few minutes later I couldn't take it anymore. My body was trembling, cock agonisingly hard. Edin was shuddering under me, his dick like steel in my mouth and big body shifting restlessly against the bed. I lifted my head and lunged up to thrust my tongue into his mouth, wrapping my arms around his neck as I straddled him. We both grunted when our cocks met, rubbing together between our bodies.

I broke the kiss to lean over and grab my bag from the side of the bed, fumbling to find the tub of lube. Edin took it from me and scooped some

out, then kissed me again as I lifted slightly on my knees so he could slip a hand down between us and behind my balls.

I melted when his slippery fingertip circled my rim, the nerve endings waking up and making me shiver. “Shit,” I grunted as he slid a long finger inside my ass.

It wasn’t long before I was encouraging him to make it two, then three, both of us suddenly impatient to get to the main event. Soon Edin was holding his cock steady for me as I raised up on my knees and lined us up, exhaling out a long breath and bearing down.

As soon as the head was inside, Edin nuzzled my scarred cheek and shifted his hands round to my ass to support my weight. My heart clenched at how thoughtful he was, no doubt remembering from last time that my balance was a little off in this position, but then I was distracted as I slid lower and his big cock filled my channel.

God, it was almost overwhelmingly large, but I was already addicted to the feel of being invaded so thoroughly. I’d never had that before. Never been with anyone bigger or stronger than me. It was pretty fucking intoxicating, knowing Edin could take anything I dished out—and give it back even more.

The thought spurred me to start moving, rocking my hips up and down as I panted against Edin’s mouth. I dipped my head to kiss beneath his jaw, and when I felt rough skin beneath my lips, I realised I was kissing the military’s brand. The only injury he’d sustained in his long life that had left behind a scar. My heart stuttered in my chest.

“Shit, scratch.” My breath hitched when Edin’s hips bucked and the head of his cock glided over my prostate, making everything clench up. I exhaled shakily. “Fuck, that feels good.”

Edin huffed a distracted, breathless chuckle. “You feel perfect,” he growled, voice even deeper and somehow more inhuman. The sound of it made my balls wrench up. “Need you under me, josdo.”

Before I could process his words, Edin was sitting forward. I let out a surprised grunt as he tipped me onto my back effortlessly and crawled up between my legs like some demonic predator, making my dick jerk and drip pre-cum onto my belly as I watched him. My breath hitched when he cupped the backs of my knees and spread them obscenely wide and up towards my chest.

“Oh fuck.” My voice trembled when his dick sank back inside in one long glide, a split-second before Edin’s smooth chest rubbed against my front and his mouth came down over mine.

My stomach lurched as I shuddered with pleasure. He was covering me completely. Caging me in with his big, hot body, pinning me down to the bed with his cock. It was a completely new sensation for me, and so fucking arousing that my prick was already tingling, just a few good strokes away from going off.

I was moaning against his mouth. I snapped my arms around his neck, holding him to me as he pounded my ass. I could feel his control slipping as he grunted against my neck, fangs worrying my skin, sending tingles cascading down my body, hardening my nipples as they rubbed against his smooth chest.

When Edin’s hips picked up speed, his cock grinding over my prostate, I gritted out a curse. But then I couldn’t stop. My chest was heaving, breaths panting out of me. The sounds started bursting out of my mouth non-stop with every thrust. Guttural grunts as Edin fucked me until I couldn’t think straight—until I was shaking and my heart was pounding so hard it felt like it would break free from my chest.

I tried to suck in a full breath, but everything was too tight and full and my entire body was straining towards the singular goal of coming until I couldn’t move. My cock throbbed, so hard and sensitive it felt like I was about to come without any stimulation. But then Edin’s long fingers curled around my dick anyway, stroking it from base to tip, making an agonised groan rise up from my chest.

My thighs were trembling, and I couldn’t even bring myself to feel self-conscious when my stump rubbed against the side of Edin’s flexing ass. “Fuck,” I moaned when everything in my lower body clenched up.

Edin made a low, pleasured sound as my ass tightened around his dick. My hips jerked up into his thrusts frantically, arms sliding free from his neck when Edin leaned up on a straightened arm, looming over me. God, his face was so handsome and inhuman, especially when it was tight with pleasure, his big eyes gleaming with lust as they roamed over me.

I grabbed his muscled sides instead, fingers digging in too tight as my cock started pulsing in Edin’s fist. I grunted, breaths heaving, before my entire body went stiff. I couldn’t help but cry out a guttural sound, head arching back when my orgasm hit, almost painfully hard.

"*Fuck*," I howled as my cock kicked, hard jets of cum hitting my chest. Edin groaned out an agonised sound, his huge bicep bulging beside my head as he leaned down to lick it up. That just made me spurt again, my balls clenching as I shivered.

Edin leaned back up on straightened arms, big eyes slitted as he looked down at me, brows drawn with tense pleasure. His hips sped up, pounding me harder as he grunted a restless sound. Just as the sensations were about to become too much for my drained, over-sensitised body, his big body stiffened and his hips punched forward one last time. He let out a strained, sexy snarl, fangs glinting as he came hard. I groaned a rough, sated sound when I realised I could feel his cock kicking inside me.

The tension finally began to drain from Edin's body, and he grunted low with the last of his orgasm, shuddering over me.

Then the bedroom door flew open. "Hunter, are you—*oh my god*."

My head snapped back to stare at the door directly opposite the foot of the bed, feeling the blood drain from my face. "What the *fuck*, Charlie!" I yelled, scrambling to hide my dick as Edin looked up, still panting from his orgasm. He bared his teeth in a displeased snarl at my best friend who was gaping at us from the doorway, face drained of colour.

"Fuck, I'm sorry! I didn't—*Jesus Christ*." Charlie tripped over his own feet in his haste to leave the room, slamming the door so hard behind him it just bounced back open. *Fucking hell*.

My heart was still hammering as I groaned out loud, reaching up to scrub a hand over my face.

"Do you want me to talk to him, josdo?" Edin rumbled, his voice menacing. When I dropped my hand and opened my eyes, he was still looming over me. He shot me a feral grin, one that told me he wouldn't necessarily be gentle in explaining things to Charlie.

Alarmed, I shook my head. "I'll do it."

I manoeuvred out from underneath Edin's big body and nearly fell flat on my ass, my legs still weak and shaking. I cursed and reached for my prosthetic, tugging it on hastily. "I'll be back in a minute, scratch."

I shoved on my sweats and was still pulling on a shirt as I limped my way out of the room. I gritted my teeth when I realised my stump wasn't seated properly in the socket of my prosthetic. "Charlie," I yelled, then spotted him disappearing into his bedroom at the far end of the hall. "Charlie, will you just—*stop* for a second. Jesus."

He stopped dead and spun on his heel, face still tight. “Can we talk about this later? When you’re not, you know…” He gestured at me vaguely, looking ill. “Still recovering?”

My face went hot, but I stood my ground and folded my arms over my chest. “What the hell, man? It’s none of your fucking business who I have sex with. What’s your problem?”

“Okay, first.” Charlie held up a finger, face pink with anger. “You gotta fucking admit, *man*, that you’d given me *absolutely no indication* that you and the purple guy were fucking. So you’ll forgive me if it takes me longer than *ten fucking seconds* to get my head around the idea.

“Second.” He stabbed another finger into the air. “I don’t give a shit who you’re fucking, Hunter, but that *doesn’t mean I want to see it*.”

“Then don’t barge into bedrooms,” I yelled, flinging my hands into the air.

“I thought you were—*Jesus Christ, dude, put your dick away*.”

Charlie’s face flushed darker and he held up his hand to block out his view of something. I turned in time to see Edin sauntering towards us. Completely naked. His dick was still half-hard.

“Edin—” I spluttered, but he just rolled his eyes.

“You humans are so prudish.” He stopped beside me and gestured at his dick. “It’s just a cock, human. Just like yours.” He placed his hands on his hips and leaned forward a little, baring his teeth at Charlie in a rabid, unfriendly grin. “Except much, *much* bigger.”

“Edin!” I choked, at the exact same time that Charlie’s face went bright red and he yelled, “*Fuck you*, asshole!”

Edin wrapped a huge arm around my neck and yanked me into his hot chest. “I don’t share, human. Hunter is *mine*.”

“What?” Charlie’s brows pinched, face still flushed. “I don’t want him! Not like that!”

“Then stop trying to watch us fuck!”

“I *didn’t know you were fucking*! I thought Hunter was freaking… *injured* or something!”

Edin barked out a rough laugh. “You need to get fucked good and hard, human, if you interpreted those sounds as pain.”

Charlie’s horrified eyes met mine. Welp, my best friend now knew what I sounded like when I was getting railed to within an inch of my life. My face flared with heat. Holy shit, this was getting *way* out of hand.

“Can we *please* stop talking about this,” I gritted out, reaching up to grip Edin’s wrist to extract myself from his hold. Once he let me go, I scrubbed hard at my hair and face before facing Charlie. “Okay.” I swallowed. “Okay, look. Edin and I are… together. Okay?”

“Together?” Charlie echoed, eyes darting between us. “As in, *together*? You’re… It’s not just fucking?”

I swallowed, feeling unsure and self-conscious, and looked at Edin. But he was already answering, voice imperious, as if daring Charlie to challenge him. “Yes, together. Together together. He is mine,” he growled out again, fingers twitching, no doubt suppressing the urge to grab me again.

Charlie balked at that. “He’s not a goddamn possession, asshole—”

“*He is mine, human*,” Edin snarled, taking a step forward. “I am his, he is mine. Not yours. Yes? Do you understand?”

Charlie’s face went red again. “I’m not fucking stupid, you big purple —”

“Okay,” I yelled, holding up my hands. “Okay, I think we all need to… cool off. Charlie—” I swallowed, looking my best friend in the eyes, pleading silently with him to *stop yelling*. “Edin and I are together. Okay? Whatever you wanna call it. It’s not just fucking.”

Charlie was silent for a moment, staring back at me. Edin thankfully remained quiet too. After a few seconds, I saw something change in Charlie’s expression; his mouth softened from its hard line, and he shot me a tiny little nod.

Then his grey eyes slid over to Edin, turning harsh and cold. “If you hurt him—”

“I already told you I wasn’t hurting him,” Edin interrupted with a smirk.

“Stop goading him, Edin,” I snapped, shoving at his arm.

Edin rolled his eyes, but a glimmer of respect passed through them as he nodded at Charlie. “I wouldn’t. Ever. But I am glad he has you to look out for him.”

Charlie appeared dumbstruck by the compliment. He recovered fast, jerking his chin once at Edin. “Fine. Whatever. Just… I don’t wanna see your goddamn dick ever again.” He looked back at me. “Next time, lock the fucking door, okay? Or at least put a damn sock on the handle.” With that, he turned and stalked away.

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered, rubbing at my hot face as I turned and limped back towards the bedroom.

“Is your leg hurting, josdo?” Edin asked, falling into step alongside me. I felt long fingers stroke the nape of my neck, causing some of the tension to ease from my shoulders.

“Just put the prosthetic on too fast,” I told him, shooting him a small smile as we got back into the bedroom. “Plus, I didn’t realise I’d have to stand and have a conversation about our relationship with my best friend ten seconds after letting you shoot a huge load up my ass, so I’m a little uncomfortable.”

Edin burst out into booming laughter, rubbing his cheek against the top of my head in a very monster-like show of affection before stepping past me into the bathroom. “It was big,” he agreed in a conversational tone. “I came very hard.”

I rolled my eyes, but a smile still pulled up the scarred corner of my mouth. “I’m so glad for you, scratch.”

“You did too.”

I rolled my eyes again. I swore, one day I was going to strain my freaking eyeballs with this monster. “Yes. I did. Well done.”

Edin snickered.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Edin and I cleaned up in the cooled water from my earlier bath before heading back into the bedroom, where I started dressing properly. I needed to be wearing real pants for this conversation, not sweats.

"Where are you going, josdo?" Edin asked, already lounging naked on the bed, hands behind his head.

I forced my gaze away from his tempting body to make sure my prosthetic was on properly before grabbing my pants. "I'm going to talk to Charlie and tell him to stop being an asshole."

Edin propped himself up, resting his weight on one elbow, which made his bicep bulge distractingly. He cocked his head. "Is he being one, then?"

"Yes." I stood up to pull my pants up over my ass and zip them. "He can't talk to you like that. Calling you names and shit. He has no idea what you've done for him, and he's being an ass."

Edin snorted. "This whole time you have talked about Charlie as though he can do no wrong."

I huffed. "Trust me, he can do plenty wrong. That's why he needs me to tell him when he's being a shithead." I yanked on my shirt and leaned down to kiss Edin. "I'll be back soon."

"Be gentle with him, josdo," Edin rumbled as I made my way to the door. "He has been through a lot. And he is not used to sharing you." He snickered. "We *did* surprise him."

I grunted a non-committal sound in response as I left the room. My heart was thudding hard as I strode down the hallway towards Charlie's room, trying to think of what I was going to actually say when I got there. I didn't like the way he was treating Edin, but Edin was right—Charlie had been through a lot. He was probably still processing everything. I had to try and remember that he hadn't been there for all the crazy shit that had happened. In his eyes, I'd showed up to rescue him with a random guy and a pair of strange monsters, one of which he just walked in on banging his best friend.

I swallowed and knocked on his door, shifting nervously. "Charlie?"

The door flew open a few moments later. Charlie stood there staring at me, arms folded over his chest. "Yeah?"

I could feel the heat climbing up my neck and over my face as I tried to forget what he'd just witnessed. "Can we talk?"

Charlie fidgeted, fingers tightening on his biceps, before he nodded once and stepped back. I followed him into the room, but didn't sit beside him when he sank down onto the edge of the bed, feeling too awkward. Instead, I hung back by the door.

"Look, it…" I hesitated, unsure of what I even really wanted to say first. This whole conversation was going to be awkward as shit, anyway. "It feels like you haven't even given Edin a chance," I went with in the end, because that was what was riling me up the most.

Charlie stiffened. "That's bullshit—"

"It's not. You've been… cold with him since we got here."

"I don't *know* him, Hunter." Charlie snorted a humourless sound. "And you obviously know him *very* well."

My face went red. "Hey, fuck you, man," I snapped, aware I was being overly defensive. "That's irrelevant right now. I'm talking about *you* being an ass."

"How the fuck am I being an ass?!" Charlie asked, voice incredulous. "I've barely spoken to him. I'm not being anything. I just don't fucking know the guy, Hunter. I get that *you* know him, but to me he's just this big purple monster that appeared with you that day in the tunnels and now apparently, you're fucking him. Fine. Great. Good for you."

I clenched my jaw. "You wouldn't be sitting here if it wasn't for Edin, Charlie. Shit, I would've died in that fucking *sinkhole* if it wasn't for Edin. So maybe you could just give him a chance, huh?"

Charlie shot up from the bed, face getting flushed as his temper flared. "I'm not *not* giving him a chance. I *just—don't—know him*." He gestured at me with an impatient wave of his hand. "You're just getting all protective over him because, I don't know, you've been fucking him this whole time, huh?"

"The fuck is *that* supposed to mean?" I took an angry step forward. "We've been busting our asses trying to get you, Charlie. Don't be such an ingrateful shit. So what if Edin and I had sex, huh? What the fuck does that even matter?" I was raising my voice, but I couldn't calm down. "Do you know what he's done to try and help you? When he didn't even know you? Just 'cause he's a good guy?"

"Jesus, Hunter, calm down—"

“No, you fucking listen to me, Charlie.” I pointed a finger at him. “You *saw* Edin fighting that behamot in the tunnels. You surely know how insanely tough they are. Don’t you remember that night a few days before you reached the prison? When Edin and Wyn tried to get you?”

Charlie swallowed. “I knew something was going on, but those big guys surrounded me and I couldn’t—”

“Edin got the shit beaten out of him trying to distract those *big guys*,” I interrupted him, “so that Wyn could get you away. But there were too many of them. He could hardly walk after.” The words were flowing out of me now, unstoppable, as I spewed all the shit that had filled my body with stress and anger and worry over the last couple of weeks. “He nearly got shot and stabbed by raiders. He nearly got stung by a giant fucking scorpion monstrosity with acid venom when we were following you in the tunnels. All to help *you*.”

“No, Hunter.” Charlie’s voice was tight, and his mouth was a thin slash in his face as he stared hard at me. “He did it to help *you*. Not me. Not that I’m not grateful,” he added in a rush when pure rage darkened my face. “I am. Of course I am. But Edin didn’t do all of that for me. He did it for you.”

Charlie gestured towards the door. “And how the fuck was I meant to have known all that, huh? I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t know he’d done any of that. But it doesn’t change the fact that I don’t know him.”

“Then *get* to know him,” I demanded in a hard tone. Some distant part of my brain was vaguely aware that I was just desperately trying to make sure the two most important people in my life got along. The thought of Edin and Charlie not liking each other caused something like despair to rise inside me, a confused tangle of loyalty that I didn’t want to unpick.

“Jesus Christ, Hunter, I’ve been awake for like two hours.” Charlie sounded exhausted. “Give me a chance to… deal with all this shit, okay? Please?”

I breathed out hard through my nose, trying to calm down. The anger left me in a rush, making me sag. I dragged myself over to the bed and sank down, resting my elbows on my knees as I bent my head to scrub weary hands over my face. I felt the bed dip as Charlie tentatively sat beside me.

“Sorry,” I muttered, dropping my hands and staring down at the floor between my feet. “Didn’t mean to pop off at you like that.”

“It’s all good.” Charlie scrubbed a rough hand over the top of my head briefly. “You uh… seem like you’ve been under a lot of pressure, man.”

I huffed. “So have you.”

There was a pause. “Yeah. But I wasn’t being nearly killed at every turn. Honestly, it was pretty uneventful for me. They were just trying to train me to fight, although I didn’t realise that was what they were doing until we got to the prison. And once I was there, I was able to vent to Cat in our cell, which helped.” He chuckled.

Something a bit like jealousy twisted my insides for a moment. “That’s good,” I said, refusing to be a little kid about it. I was used to being the guy Charlie vented to.

I wondered if this was what Charlie had felt, when he saw me with Edin. The thread of jealousy morphed into guilt. I knew I was being irrational and impatient, but I couldn’t help it. I wanted Edin and Charlie to get along.

“You need to vent too?” Charlie asked me. “Want to tell me what happened? Because honestly, man, I’m kind of desperate to know how you ended up roping the freaking *Soul Eater* in to your ridiculous plan.”

I snorted. “That was all thanks to Edin, too,” I said, then took a deep breath. “But yeah. I need to tell you everything that’s happened.”

So, I did. Starting from the moment Edin’s big, horned head appeared over the side of that sinkhole in Kentucky, all the way to those final moments of discussing our plan to break out of the prison just hours before our fights. I left out the intimate details, and the private things Edin had told me about his life, but the words wouldn’t stop spewing out of me once I started. I’d never talked so much in my life. Shit, I really *had* needed to vent to Charlie.

He was pale, eyes glazed over with something like shock. “Parasites? Are you serious?”

I nodded. “I didn’t believe it at first. But I saw one of them, man. I saw Wyn cut it out of that woman’s stomach after she threw up goddamn *gallons* of this… frog spawn type stuff. With eggs in it.” I paused, feeling ill remembering it. “They hatched in front of me.”

“Jesus Christ,” he croaked, scrubbing a hand over his shaven jaw. “And the guy with him… he was military?” Charlie swallowed when I nodded. “And Mallory was the one who… So that’s why…”

“Yeah. Sorry I couldn’t explain it to you at the time,” I said grimly, referring to Wyn torturing and killing the lieutenant in front of us. Shit, had that only been a couple of days ago?

“Christ.”

We lapsed into silence. I could feel Charlie's brain churning, trying to process everything I'd just told him. Eventually, he huffed out a big breath, cheeks puffing up. "Damn. And so, at some point during all of that, you and the purple guy started boning?"

Back to this. I wanted to roll my eyes even as my cheeks went hot. "Yeah," I grunted.

"And uh… you're, what… a couple now?"

I leaned forward to rest my elbows on my knees, scrubbing my hands roughly over my face. "I dunno, man," I mumbled. "I don't… Does it matter? We'll be leaving. It's not like we can just… not go back to the military." My stomach clenched tight at the thought.

There was a moment of silence. "Yeah," Charlie answered, voice low with a thread of sympathy. "Sorry, man. That sucks."

I straightened abruptly, shaking my head. "It's fine. It's…" I waved a hand, trying to act like it wasn't a big deal, even though the thought of it was making my insides feel like I'd swallowed razorblades. "I'll think about it later. Why don't we go explore this place? I was basically a zombie when we got here so I didn't take in any of it."

"Yeah." Charlie nodded his head towards the window. "The back yard is huge. We're surrounded by forest, too. Explains why it's so quiet. Looks pretty cool. Plus…" He leaned over to the nightstand and grabbed something. "Found this. Might help."

He held it out to me, a plastic yellow and black box about the length of my hand. When I took it and turned it over, I realised it was one of those mechanical flashlights, with a lever on the underside that looked almost like a trigger. "Is this one of those squeeze flashlights?" I asked.

"Yeah." Charlie took it back off me and pumped the crank a few times. It flickered to life, then dimmed a few seconds after he stopped.

"Nice."

"Yeah. Guess whoever lived here had stuff like this in case they lost power, since it seems pretty remote. Speaking of which, the lights don't work."

"Yeah, but," I nodded at the flashlight, "at least we have that. Maybe we'll find more. I'll go get Edin and we can have a look around."

Charlie went tense for a split-second before he nodded. "Sounds good."

I tried not to snap at him again. It would take time—I knew it would. I also knew it had been irrational and unrealistic to expect Charlie to

immediately love Edin. Hell, even *I* hadn't been fond of him at the beginning. I just had to hope that after they spent some time together, they'd start liking each other a bit better.

Before I stood up, and I reached over and gave Charlie's cheek a teasing pat. The straggly beard and shaggy hair were gone, and he was back to his normal self with stubble and a close shave all over. "Looking good, champ."

Charlie batted my hand away irritably, and I laughed as I stood up.

"Wait."

I turned and saw Charlie had gone pale as he stood up from the bed. "Wait, so… if you've been getting laid this whole time, *did* you shave your balls with the razor?"

Somehow, I managed to hold back the bark of laughter and keep a straight face.

When I went to get Edin, he was luckily already dressed. I was pretty sure I would have gotten distracted by his naked body otherwise, and now that I was up, I wanted to move around.

After Charlie and I ate, we started exploring. There were three more bedrooms upstairs, plus a large bathroom across from Charlie's room and a doorway that led up to an attic. The staircase leading downstairs felt uneven beneath my fake leg, messing with my balance. The downstairs hallway was big and dim, the narrow panes of glass either side of the front door caked in dirt and cobwebs. To our right was a cluttered living room that stretched the length of the house. The doors on the left led to a dining room at the front of the house with a big fireplace, and the kitchen sat at the back of the house overlooking the yard.

Off the kitchen, there was a pantry stacked from floor to ceiling with homemade preserves. Rows and rows of jars filled with pickles, tomatoes, peaches, plums—even cherries in booze—all identified by neat, handwritten labels. The liquid inside some of the jars had gone cloudy and murky, but others looked like they'd been put in there yesterday.

When we stepped out into the backyard, which blended almost seamlessly into the forest behind it, I couldn't help but stare. There was just… so much green. Nature had reclaimed this place, and everything

beyond the raised deck we were standing on was a thick tangle of tall dry grass, and trees with wide, heavy boughs. Overgrown bushes edged the property line, slowly engulfing everything around them, including an old stone birdbath covered in green moss, and a brittle wooden bench that had been bleached by the sun.

Beside me, Charlie turned to look back at the house. From the corner of my eye I saw his head tilt back to look at the roof, so I turned to eye it with him.

"Look," he said, jerking his chin up.

I squinted, making out raised, black sheets that looked bolted on. They were dull with dirt and covered in creeping vine that had spread over the roof. "What?"

"I think they're solar panels." Charlie turned again to cast his eye over the sprawling yard, taking in a wheelbarrow whose belly had corroded clean through, the hole ringed with orange rust. There was a covered well to our left, beside a wooden shed that was half falling down thanks to the low branches of a tree slowly penetrating its side. A row of greenhouses was tucked round the corner of the house, by the kitchen.

"I think this was one of those homesteads," Charlie said slowly, walking to the edge of the deck and stepping down onto the grass. "You know, where people tried to be self-sufficient and stuff? Using clean energy, growing their own food, preserving… That kind of stuff."

"Yeah?" I didn't know enough about taking care of a home, especially a self-sufficient one, to be able to recognise the signs, but I knew Charlie had grown up on a farm before the monsters rose. "Shall we see what's in that shed, then?"

I took Edin's hand and tugged him forward as we stepped off the deck, heading towards it.

"Wait." Charlie's voice made us stop and turn. We watched as he walked over to a patch of ground to the right that appeared flatter—more unnatural—compared to the bumpy grass around it.

When he kicked away dirt and stones, dragging tangles of weeds aside, my heart jumped. "Is that a bunker entrance?" I asked, voice low with excitement.

Charlie bent down and grabbed the handle when it was exposed, brushing away the vines that had crept over the hatch, their suckers leaving

delicate white lines on the rusted metal. He yanked, but it didn't budge. He tried again. "Shit."

"Let me." Edin stepped forward and waited patiently as Charlie tried one last time, straining to lift the thick metal, his face going red from the effort.

My lips twitched. "I think it's locked, champ," I said, nodding at the rusted padlock the size of my fist holding the hatch secure to its frame.

Charlie grunted and finally let go, admitting defeat. He stepped back and watched as Edin leaned down, grasped the handle in his big hand, and pulled.

Something cracked, and then the metal hatch was lifting effortlessly, half of the padlock dangling in the air for a few seconds before it dropped from the bunker door and thudded onto the ground.

I huffed a laugh. "Nice, scratch."

He shot me a wolfish grin over his shoulder as he let the hatch fall back the rest of the way. We all stepped closer to peer down into the dark depths.

"I'll go down—" I started, but Charlie interrupted me.

"No way. I'm going."

"I don't mind—"

"Hunter. You think I don't want to go and explore a bunker that hasn't been opened for *twenty years?*" Charlie took a step closer. "Let me do this."

I chuckled. "Okay, fine. Go for it. You got that flashlight?"

Charlie pulled it out from his back pocket to show me before replacing it. He stopped at the edge of the hole and turned to start climbing down the ladder into the darkness.

"Be careful," I couldn't help but say as Edin walked back over to me and pulled me into his big, warm chest, wrapping his arms around me tight. "Yell if there's a corpse down there."

It was unlikely, seeing as there'd been a locked padlock on the *outside* of the bunker hatch, but still. The owner had built a bunker here for a reason—what better reason could there have been to retreat into it than monsters rising and taking over the world?

Charlie's head vanished as he descended into the bunker, and we listened to the soft sound of his boots hitting each metal step of the ladder. There was a thud, followed by the rhythmic whirring of Charlie cranking up the flashlight.

"Holy shit," I heard him say a few seconds later.

I disentangled from Edin's embrace but grabbed his hand, threading our fingers together to pull him with me as I stepped back to the edge of the bunker entrance. "What?" I called down.

"Hold on, man." His voice got fainter as he went deeper. Faint sounds of things being shifted around drifted up, and it was a good few minutes before Charlie's dark head reappeared in the weak light reaching down into the depths of the bunker.

He quickly climbed back up. "This isn't just a homestead—I think this was a *prepper's* homestead. There are *so* many supplies down there, dude. And not just cans of food and medical supplies. There are guns. Ammo."

I couldn't help but let out an astonished bark of laughter. "Are you serious?" I turned to stare at Edin. "You brought us to a prepper's place? Edin, you big, beautiful genius." I grabbed his face and pulled him down for a hard kiss.

When I let go of him, Edin's jutting cheekbones were adorably flushed a darker purple. "This place is good, yes?"

I couldn't help but kiss him again, even though Charlie let out an irritable grunt. "It's good, scratch. Real good. How the hell has it stayed empty? This is a *goldmine*."

Edin's arms curled back around my middle as I turned to face the sprawling yard of the property, which blended almost seamlessly into the forest behind it thanks to most of the fence having collapsed and rotted away.

"I've been here several times over the years," Edin told me, his deep voice rumbling through my back from where his chest was pressed against me. I felt him rub his cheekbone over my head. "It is very remote. We are nowhere near another house for miles. But there has been a pair of borolesh living in the forest who probably stopped any raiders from coming here, if they *were* aware of it."

I recognised the word. "Are those what we saw pulling that RV?"

I felt Edin nod. "They are very gentle, but can look intimidating as they are so large."

My stomach twisted with a sickening thought. "Do you think the pair we saw pulling the RV were taken from here?"

Edin stilled, his big arms stiffening where they were wrapped around me. "I do not know, Hunter," he eventually said, voice sombre at the

thought. “But I haven’t yet seen the two that were here. Maybe they have moved on.”

I squeezed his wrist where it rested on my stomach. “Maybe.”

“Well, whatever has kept the raiders away from this place, they’re missing out,” Charlie said, stepping away from the bunker entrance and resting his hands on his hips as he looked out over the yard again. “This is like, the perfect spot out here.”

Yeah. It was. I imagined what it would be like if we could just… stay here. If we didn’t have to go back to the military. If I didn’t have to say goodbye to Edin.

For a second, so much longing filled my chest that I struggled to take in a breath, and it only got worse when Edin absently rubbed his cheekbone against the side of my head in that weird, monster-like show of affection. The thought of being apart from him, of never seeing him again, was almost unbearable. God, I was going to miss him. I couldn’t believe how important he had become in such a short stretch of time. How vital he felt to me now.

But none of it mattered. We *did* have to go back. I *would* have to say goodbye to Edin. I tried to push away the pointless yearning. Dread settled in its place at the thought of returning to my old life. And exhaustion. I was just… so tired. The military had already taken twelve years, my looks and half a leg from me.

I wondered how much more it would take before I was no longer useful.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

After two weeks at the homestead, no one had mentioned leaving.

Every morning I woke up scared shitless that Edin would tell me he was moving on. I felt like an asshole for dreading it, because eventually *I* would be the one doing it, assuming he didn't leave first. My fear of him taking off meant I didn't bring it up—ever. Charlie hadn't mentioned returning to the military yet either, but I knew he still expected us to.

Me, though… I wasn't so sure anymore. My gut was telling me to stay. With Edin. The longer we spent on the homestead, the less I wanted to leave. It was peaceful here—the kind of peaceful I couldn't remember ever experiencing before.

We spent our days fixing up the place, even though we weren't expecting to stay. But it was an interesting challenge that passed the time and gave both Charlie and me something productive to focus on. I knew Charlie coped better with a task, and he threw himself wholeheartedly into exploring the homestead.

We realised after a few days that the borolesh were still living in the forest, but Edin assured us they were gentle. It was actually a good thing, because they were a definite deterrent. They never came very close to the house, but we occasionally caught flashes of pale, drooping skin between the trees as they reached up to strip the upper branches for the leaves.

They also seemed to enjoy fruit, because the only time they ever got close to the house was to peer with interest at the fruit trees. There were apple and plum trees dotted around the property, more than enough to feed the two borolesh and us. We realised that the big, sectioned off area near the kitchen door was an old vegetable patch when we came across some vegetables that had thrived despite years of neglect. Self-seeding, Charlie had called them. Plants that came back every year on their own. Charlie said he could see asparagus, spinach, rhubarb, and said there were likely to more.

The greenhouses were overgrown tangles, but salvageable. The air had been hot and dry when we'd stepped inside one of them, even though several panes of glass had cracked or smashed. Charlie pointed out tomato and pepper plants growing inside.

The dim interior of the big, half-rotted shed was draped with cobwebs, thick and drooping with years of dust. It looked like it had been used as an old potting station. Plastic plant pots were stacked haphazardly on the sill of the only window, which was too dirty to let in any light. Garden tools lined one wall, still hung up neatly on the big nails hammered into the wood. An old lawn mower sat under the rotten boards that had come loose, and the faint scent of gasoline still hung in the air, having long ago permeated the wood. There was a hefty dark green composting bin tucked in the corner with a big sticker still on the side, the exterior coated in dirt and cobwebs but the belly of it spotlessly clean when I lifted the lid.

The real find in the shed, though, was the wooden crate filled with seed packets. Vegetable seeds. Fruit seeds. Even some decorative plant and flower seeds. Charlie expressed doubt that any of them would actually grow, seeing as they were all at least twenty years old, but I still found it exciting. Charlie had watched as I'd carefully slid the crate back into its spot on the old wooden shelves, neither of us commenting on how irrelevant it was that we'd found them, anyway. Wasn't like we had any need to take seeds back to the military base.

We'd gone through every inch of the bunker after making sure the air vents weren't blocked. Exploring it initially took a long time because we only had Charlie's dynamo flashlight until we found several more down there, plus some solar lanterns, which sped the process up. Floor-to-ceiling metal shelves lined most of the walls, stacked high with non-perishable food, medical supplies, spare clothing, camping and hunting equipment as well as a trunk full of weapons and a huge amount of ammo. A pristine American flag hung over a neatly made cot, its dark green blanket still tucked in with military corners.

We didn't touch any of the food in the bunker, because we hadn't needed to yet. Some of the vegetable plants were ready to be harvested, and Edin was an incredible hunter. He disappeared into the forest every day for no more than an hour and returned with rabbits, wild chickens, and even a deer one day, slung over his muscular shoulder like it weighed nothing. He'd once brought us an unidentifiable creature that was definitely *not* of this world. It had looked almost like a big naked mole rat, about the size of a small pig, but with a beak instead of teeth and six long, thin legs that ended in sharp points. After we'd politely declined to eat it, not knowing if it was safe, he'd stuck to earthly wildlife.

He had shown us how to skin and prepare the animals for cooking. Even though he didn't need to eat, he said his pack had hunted in his world for skins. They would leave the meat for scavenger creatures that ate carrion.

We were eating better than we had in goddamn years. Real, roasted meat and fresh vegetables. There was the big fireplace indoors, in the old dining room, and a firepit outside. We tended to use the latter to cook so the house didn't get smoky, and heated water for washing inside.

Whoever had lived here had been prepared for a long stay, cut off from the world. It made me wonder what had happened to them, because the carefully stored supplies and surplus items were all still untouched, which made me doubt that they'd been here when the monsters rose. If they had, surely they would have holed up in the bunker. But that was basically untouched too.

I had to remind myself that whatever had befallen the owner had happened twenty years ago. There was no point feeling guilty about using their stuff now. They were long gone, either dead or living in one of the cities.

Alongside the bunker, the house's basement was another goldmine. Toothpaste and toothbrushes, toilet paper, detergent, cleaning supplies, soap, disposable razors. The lack of power meant the washing machine and dryer were useless, but at least we could wash our clothes and sheets by hand and hang them outside to dry properly.

Even after two weeks of getting to experience it, I was still addicted to waking up every morning in clean sheets, sunlight streaming into the room through the newly washed window, with the sounds of birds chirping happily outside and the feel of Edin's big, warm body wrapped around me from behind.

If I ignored the fact that we really, *really* should have headed back to the Tennessee base by now, I could bask in that peace for long moments before I got up, or Edin stirred and started kissing my neck, making the arousal that was a constant low simmer when I was around him spike. I could pretend for a few minutes that this was our life, and it wasn't going to end.

But then reality would always slither its way back into my brain, insidious, reminding me that one of two things was going to happen first: either Edin was going to leave, or Charlie and I were. Staying here was just prolonging the inevitable. The other shoe would drop eventually.

I didn’t want it to. I didn’t know what I was going to do, but I *did* know that I didn’t want to leave Edin. Which felt hopeless and was painful to even force myself to admit, but it was the truth. I didn’t want to leave him. I didn’t want to say goodbye to him. So where did that leave us?

Either way, I knew I needed to thank Edin for everything he’d done for me. For Charlie. We’d spent the day clearing weeds from the vegetable patch. It was late afternoon now, and I was soaking my sore, aching muscles in the tub thanks to Edin carrying hot water up for me. I’d been a soldier for twelve years, but damn, yard work was draining. I forced myself to climb out when the water started getting cool. After sorting out my leg, I got dressed in clean clothes, pleasantly tired and satisfied from a day of hard work, ready to start making our dinner.

My heart thudded when Edin walked in as I was pulling my shirt over my head. “Hey scratch.” I smiled at him as I pulled on my shirt.

He walked over and kissed me. “How was your bath? Are your muscles still sore?”

I chuckled. “It was great. Thank you. And yeah, a little, but I’ll be fine in the morning.”

“Mm.” He rumbled out that arrogant little sound. “I will rub them for you later.”

My cock twitched at that, and because I was a greedy bastard when it came to Edin, I didn’t argue. “Sounds good to me.”

Edin’s fingers tangled with mine. “Shall we go find Charlie?”

“Wait.” I tugged when he started pulling me towards the door. Edin stopped and turned to face me, waiting expectantly. I swallowed, my face getting hot. “I just… I just wanted to thank you.”

Edin cocked his head. “For what?” He let go of my hand to gesture towards the bathroom. “The bath? You did. I don’t mind carrying—”

“No, not the bath.” I huffed out a little laugh. “Well, yes, for the bath. But for all of it. For everything.” I exhaled a shaky breath, nerves swirling inside me like a tornado. “I just want to tell you that I… I appreciate everything you’ve done, so much. I’d have been fucked without you. But I also…” I swallowed. “You made this all bearable. I’m so glad you were with me. That you still are,” I added quickly, suddenly worried he’d think I was telling him it was time for him to leave.

Edin was quiet for a moment. “I am glad I was with you too,” he said. My heart jumped when he stepped closer and cupped my chin gently, thumb

pressing over the end of my scar beneath my lip. “You would have died ten times over if I hadn’t been, josdo,” he added in a mock-stern voice. “You like to run into trouble.”

I huffed and rested my hands on the smooth, bare skin of his waist, so hot beneath my fingers. “Just dumb and reckless. That’s why I’m missing half a leg and my face is all torn up.”

Edin grunted a disagreeing sound. “You’re brave, not dumb.” He paused. “Maybe a little reckless, yes. You were all set to barrel into the koleb tunnels on your own that first day, with no weapon and no plan.”

I felt my face get hot. “Yeah, that would have been a bad decision. Honestly, scratch, I have no idea why you were willing to help me. I wasn’t the most reasonable that day. I was being a total dick.” I loosed a self-deprecating little chuckle. “Although I think that’s my default setting. Honestly, I have no idea why you’ve stuck with me for this long.” The words made me feel painfully vulnerable, and my face went even hotter as I said them.

Edin huffed and stroked his big hand down the back of my head. “Truly?”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, scratch. We both know full well that I’m a bad-tempered asshole. And I really was a prick to you at the beginning.” I shook my head, throat going tight at the thought. I couldn’t believe I’d ever found Edin infuriating. I mean, sure, he *was* still infuriating, but… not in the same way. Not at all.

Edin chuckled. “You can be a bad-tempered asshole, yes. But you weren’t a… *prick*, Hunter. You were very stressed. Very worried about your friend. And don’t forget injured. I was just a strange monster who came along and insisted on helping when you didn’t want the help.”

I shook my head, exhaling. “Yeah, and look how I treated you for helping me. I don’t… I hate that you’ve gotten hurt because of me, scratch.” My voice went hoarse. “I’ll never forgive myself for it.”

“Hunter, stop.” Edin’s deep, rumbling voice was firm. His dominant tone made pleasure curl through my belly, and I fell silent at his command. “I chose to help you. I knew there would be risks. But I *wanted* to help you.” His big thumb stroked behind my ear, sending shivers down my spine. “I am glad I decided to help you that day.” His voice got lower. “I am glad I know you, Hunter. So glad.”

Fuck. My throat closed up, almost choking me. “I’m glad I know you too, scratch,” I got out, clutching his sides tight.

Edin leaned in and kissed me, forcing a rough sound to tear from my throat. I dug my fingers in tight and kissed him back even harder, trying to convey what I felt for him without words. I was shit at words. I hoped I could tell him in other ways just how much he meant to me.

When we broke apart, I was dazed, my heart racing. I licked my lips, shaking my head. “I still don’t get what you see in me, though.”

Edin let out a little huff. “You are fierce. And strong. Proud—maybe *too* proud, but I am too, so I like it.” He smiled at me and smoothed his thumb gently over my earlobe. “And so very loyal. I have never met someone who would go to such lengths for another person.”

“*You* would,” I countered immediately. “Wyn would, as well. For you or Danny.”

“Mm.” He smiled at me, the tips of his fangs peeking out. “I admire your loyalty, josdo. Your determination.” His hand slid lower, so he could run his thumb over my chin and along my jaw. His voice deepened. “And your big cock.”

I choked out a disbelieving laugh as he grinned wolfishly at me. Before I could think of a response, he leaned in and kissed me again. “What about me?” he asked, tone teasing. “Is that what you like about me? My big cock?”

I snorted. “Well, it’s definitely a plus.” I brought one hand round to lay my palm over the centre of his chest, feeling it rise and fall with his slow breaths. His heartbeat was so strong. “You’re just… good, Edin. Kind. And generous, and selfless. And you…” I flushed, feeling exposed. “You make me calm. You soothe me.”

He chuckled. “I certainly didn’t in the beginning. I thought your head was going to pop that first day.”

I huffed. “I was under a lot of stress. You just said so yourself!” I paused. “But you *were* kind of annoying, scratch.”

Edin boomed out a big laugh and followed the curve of my ear with his thumb. I slid my arms around him and tentatively closed the distance between us, until I could rest my cheek on his shoulder, my nose tucked against the bend of his neck. I’d never held anyone like this, like I was just seeking comfort from them. But I was from Edin. I could be vulnerable with Edin, in a way I could never be even with Charlie. I breathed in his

wood and leather scent, closing my eyes, feeling the heat of his smooth skin beneath my cheek and arms.

"That makes me happy, josdo," Edin murmured, wrapping his big arms tight around me. I felt his jutting cheekbone rest against the top of my head, rubbing a little. "That I can be this for you. That I soothe you." He paused. "You soothe me too. The restless part of me that has been there since my family was… Since I've been alone. You make me feel like I can settle again."

I shuddered out a breath and rubbed my cheek against Edin's smooth shoulder, knowing he liked the feel of my stubble. My throat was too tight to speak, so I didn't. Instead, I kissed his shoulder, then the bend of his neck, before lifting my head and crushing my lips against his.

His mouth moved against mine eagerly, hot and firm. The thought that I might never get to experience this again after we left this place was too much, and I wrenched my mouth away with a gasp.

"Shit, scratch, I don't… I don't want you to leave," I choked out, heart pounding hard at the admission.

Edin went totally still, like a predator sensing nearby prey. "I'm not leaving, josdo."

I shook my head, looking down. I shuddered when Edin's warm lips rested against my forehead. "But we are. We'll have to go back soon. Charlie and me."

Edin's breath caught, tension creeping through his body before he tightened his arms around me. "Do you?" he asked in a low, uncharacteristically vulnerable voice. "Do you have to go back, Hunter?" I heard him swallow. "Would you not stay with me instead?"

Oh fuck. Pure longing pounded through me like a drumbeat—*stay with Edin, stay with Edin*. I wanted to say yes. So badly. But everything was a confused tangle in my head. Charlie. The military. My responsibilities. Shit, my entire *life* was tied up in the military. Could I really walk away from it all?

"I want to," I heard myself admitting before I'd even thought about what I was going to say. "But I… I don't…"

Edin was silent for a few moments, waiting for me to finish. When I didn't say more, he lifted a hand to cup the side of my neck. "What will make you happy, Hunter?"

You. You make me happy. I opened my mouth to say it, but the words got stuck at first, feeling so significant that my heart started racing. I pushed through the lump in my throat that was blocking them. “You do, scratch,” I said, voice raspy with something hot that was filling up my chest.

“Enough to stay out here?” he asked, tentative and soft, like he was being careful not to come across as forceful or imposing.

“Yes,” I answered without thinking, gripping his sides harder, and something squeezed tight inside me at the admission. It *was* enough. Edin was important enough to make me want to walk away from everything.

But wanting something didn’t mean you got it. My hands went sweaty against Edin’s skin as I truly considered, for the first time, abandoning the military to stay with him. Was it even possible?

“If I did… If…” I licked my lips, voice shaky with nerves as my heart tried to pound its way out of my chest. “What would we do? Would we…”

“We could stay here,” Edin answered quickly. “I know you like it here. I do too. It is peaceful. I have stopped by here many times, but never stayed for long. It always felt… desolate when I was alone.” He gave me a small smile. “It’s different being here with you.”

My chest went hot and tight. “So, what…” I licked my lips, still sensitive from his firm kiss. “What does this mean? What… happens now?”

Edin stroked his hand down the back of my head, leaving it resting on my nape, its heavy warmth sending pleasure down my spine. “That is up to you, josdo.”

“I…” Indecision made me freeze up for a few moments. Could I do it? Could I abandon the military? Everything in my body was straining to reach for Edin and not let go. It felt like too momentous a decision to make right this second, even though my gut was urging me to tell Edin that I’d stay with him. Out here. Fuck everything else.

It was more than that, though. Now that I had allowed myself to truly consider it, I realised it wasn’t just the desire to stay with Edin. It was everything I’d witnessed. Everything I’d learned about the military. Did I really want to go back and work for them again, knowing what I knew now?

The wiser, more rational part of me told me to think about it fully. To truly consider what it meant. Leaving the military. Leaving Charlie. Living out in the Wastes, constantly at risk of being attacked by monsters, or

raiders… or the military itself. I thought again about Danny. About what had happened to him.

I looked into Edin's big eyes, with his eerily oversized, deep purple irises, and that bone-deep instinct urging me to grab onto him and never let go increased a hundredfold. Still, I forced myself to do the sensible thing.

"I don't want to make any rash decisions, scratch," I said, my voice tentative. I needed a bit more time to think. To truly consider what I'd be sacrificing.

I wanted to talk to Charlie. He'd been my voice of reason for years. He was the only person who I knew would give me his honest opinion, while also knowing exactly how my mind worked.

"Would you… Do you mind if I go talk to Charlie?" I asked him. "I feel like I should… I owe it to him to tell him."

I realised that made it sound final—like I'd already made my decision. Maybe I had. Excited anticipation was bubbling in my gut, but I tried to force it back—to not be too hasty.

If Edin picked up on it, he didn't comment. He nodded once and leaned forward to kiss my cheek, which—fuck—made me want to melt into a puddle of goo. I had to step back so that I wouldn't just lean back into his big, warm body and stay there.

"I'll be back soon," I told him.

Edin shot me a big, wolfish grin, his eyes sparkling. "I will go hunt your dinner while you speak to Charlie."

Shit, the thought of it shouldn't be turning me on as much as it was. "Thanks, scratch. Preferably something that originated in this world and didn't travel here through an interdimensional tear."

He snickered. "I know you didn't want to eat that wanuk, but there *are* some creatures that came through that I have heard are very tasty—"

"I'll work my way up to them," I interjected, feeling queasy at the thought. "Thanks, though."

He kissed my cheek again on his way out of the room, his long tail swishing lazily behind him. I gave myself a few more minutes to mentally prepare before I went off to find Charlie, my palms still sweating and heart going nuts.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Charlie wasn't in his room when I headed there first, the door standing ajar. I peered out of the hallway window that looked out onto the backyard and could see him sitting on the top step of the deck, leaning back on one hand as he raised the other at Edin, who waved back before vanishing into the forest.

I made my way downstairs and took a deep breath before stepping outside and crossing the desk to drop down beside him. "Hey."

"Hey." Charlie jerked his chin towards the forest. "Edin's just gone hunting."

"Yeah, I know. I, uh…" I swallowed, wiping my clammy hands over the thighs of my pants. "We should probably talk about what's going to happen."

"Huh?" Charlie turned his head to give me an odd look.

"I mean what we're going to do. Staying here or…"

"Yeah, we'll have to head back soon." Charlie exhaled, looking back out over the forest. "It's just… nice out here. Sometimes I even forget we're in the Wastes. That there are monsters and raiders and fucking… underground fighting rings where people are being forced to fight just a few hours away. It all seems so distant, you know?"

"Yeah," I croaked, picking at an invisible loose thread on the knee of my pants to keep my head bent. "But I… Do you want to go back?"

There was a pause. "What?" I could feel Charlie's eyes on me again. "What do you mean?"

"Do you *want* to go back?" I forced myself to look up and meet his eyes, the cool grey so familiar. "Do you want to go back to the military?"

Charlie stared at me. "What do you mean do I *want* to go back?" he asked as though he hadn't even considered it being a variable factor. "Do you… *not*, then?" He sat up straighter. "You want to stay out *here?* Just…" He waved a hand around us. "Free balling it in the Wastes without the military's protection? Like a raider?"

I felt my face flush. “You just said yourself it’s nice out here,” I shot back, voice defensive.

Charlie snorted in disbelief. “Well yeah, but I just meant it’s been nice being able to relax here after everything that’s happened, you know? I don’t…” He shook his head. “This is still *in the Wastes*, Hunter. We haven’t had any monsters showing up who want to eat our guts or rip us to shreds because we’ve been lucky. But it’ll happen eventually. That, or raiders will turn up and shoot us in our sleep.” He stared at me again, like he was having trouble processing. “Are you seriously considering not going back?”

I shrugged awkwardly, not sure what to say. We hadn’t outright addressed me and Edin since that initial argument Charlie and I had when we first got here. Not like it was a forbidden subject, but… there hadn’t been anything to say. Charlie had gotten used to witnessing us touching, or kissing, or just being close. I hadn’t tried to hide anything from him, but I’d also avoided talking about our relationship because I hadn’t wanted to face the fact that it would be ending soon.

“Hunter…” Charlie shook his head. “I get that we’ve learned some… pretty bad shit about the military recently. I mean, what you told me Danny went through is…” He exhaled. “But that surely doesn’t mean you’re just going to give up *everything*?”

I rubbed my face roughly. “I just don’t… I’m not sure I’d even be able to go back to living that way, Charlie.”

“Are you kidding me?” he burst out, voice incredulous. “It’s been a few weeks, Hunter!”

I clenched my jaw and cast about for a way to articulate the doubt and unease that bubbled in my gut every time I thought of returning to our duties. “We’ve always just… followed orders, right?” I said after a minute. “That’s what soldiers do. We’ve never questioned why they send us to monitor raider camps or monster hives. We’ve just done it. But…” I exhaled and reached up to scrub at my face, feeling the tougher scar tissue tug. “I don’t think I can do it now, Charlie. I don’t think I can just… blindly follow orders when I don’t even trust the ones giving them anymore.”

Charlie swallowed. “I can understand feeling that way. But…” He made a helpless sound. “What else is there, Hunter? What would you… I mean, can you even just *leave*? Do they let you?” He sounded flustered and confused.

“I doubt it,” I said in a flat voice. “Not without a damn good reason. I don’t know, though. But I don’t think I can even go back, Charlie. At all. I’d have to report on what’s happened, where we’ve been. I can’t risk Edin.”

Charlie exhaled a low, shaky sound. “It might set them on him again.” I’d told him about Edin being specimen zero-zero-two. He rubbed at his jaw, the rasp of his calloused fingers against his stubble comfortingly familiar to me. “So, what are you going to do?” He looked at me, brows furrowed. “I know you’re not an idiot, Hunter, and capable of thinking your decisions through, but… are you seriously considering living out in the Wastes?”

I hesitated. “Yeah,” I rasped eventually. “I am.” Another pause, this one tense. “With Edin,” I added, my tone cautious.

Charlie let out a humourless chuckle. “No shit. I figured as much, jackass.”

I let out a breath and shoved at his shoulder. “Less lip, asshole.”

Charlie huffed, but sobered up again fast. “So, you…” His eyes were sombre when he looked over at me. “You’re not going back?” he asked, voice vulnerable in a way I hadn’t heard before.

A pang lanced my chest when I faced the implications of my decision fully for the first time. If I stayed with Edin and Charlie went back… there was a chance we’d never see each other again. Part of me would be heartbroken, but what I felt for Edin was… deeper. More consuming. Eclipsing. I could survive being apart from Charlie, if I knew he was safe and happy. I didn’t know if I could say the same about being apart from Edin, and that thought was as terrifying as it was exhilarating.

“I… don’t think so,” I said at length in answer to his question. “I… I really don’t think I can.” I shook my head. “I really don’t think I *want* to.”

Jarring certainty thudded in my gut as I said it out loud. I didn’t want to. After everything I’d seen and heard, I didn’t want to work for the military anymore. I didn’t want to spy on monsters for them. I didn’t want to risk aiding them in any nefarious or corrupt activities they might be doing.

I wasn’t sure if Charlie agreed, but I was pretty sure the military was at least part-funding that fighting ring. Even if those at the very top weren’t aware of it, we knew for a goddamn fact that several higher-ranking officers were, at least. And they were drugging and entering soldiers to fucking fight for them. Just thinking about it made my blood boil.

Thinking about what they'd done to Danny—and even Wyn—made my blood boil too.

But nothing filled me with more fury than thinking about what they'd done to Edin.

The answer crystallised in my skull, solid and immovable. "I can't go back, Charlie," I said, the note of finality clear in my voice. "I want to stay with Edin." My face burned at the confession, as if I'd given a long-winded sonnet on my feelings for him.

Charlie nodded, but he looked fairly dazed, like he was still processing. We sat in silence for a few minutes until he cleared his throat. "I don't… I don't think I can stay with you, man," he said. "I don't think I can just abandon my job, my… whole life. I understand why you are," he added hastily. "I do. The things you've seen and heard and… and what they did to Edin…" He shook his head. "I get it. I'm not judging you at all. I want you to be happy. If staying out here with Edin makes you happy, you should do it."

"What about Mallory, though?" I asked, feeling guilty that a small part of me was selfishly trying to make Charlie consider abandoning the military like I was. I couldn't help but ask, though. "You saw for yourself that at least *some* officers are doing awful shit. You really want to go work for them again?"

"I know, but…" He shook his head. "From what you've told me about Danny, Mallory was a bad seed. Maybe… maybe it was just the small group of officers we saw there who are in on this?" He sounded uncertain even as he said it.

"Maybe." I paused, contemplating whether or not to push the issue. In the end, I did, because the more I thought about Charlie returning to the military, the more it worried me. "You saw the guards, though, Charlie. They were wearing military gear and carrying military-grade weapons."

"Shit." Charlie's face was tense. Drawn. "Yeah."

"And they were forcing soldiers to fight." The worry grew, churning in my gut. "What if one of those other officers recognises you? What if they do something to you to keep the whole thing hidden? What if they force you to go back there?"

Charlie swallowed. "I don't… I don't think that would happen." His voice was hoarse. "Those other officers didn't look at me once when I was standing a few feet from them while they were training their guy. If they

watched our fights and recognised us, I doubt they'd have stuck around. And they sure as shit didn't even notice us when the Soul Eater showed up."

I exhaled. "Yeah." The concern was still there, simmering low, but Charlie was right. It was a worst-case scenario. "So, you're going back?"

Charlie shot me a look. "Are *you* judging *me* for that?" he asked without heat.

I shook my head straight away. "No. I understand." I exhaled. "It's a decision that I haven't come to lightly. And you haven't seen and heard everything I have for yourself. Plus, you know… I have Edin," I added, flustered, feeling my face flush.

Charlie didn't tease me for it, though. "Yeah." He stared out at forest that Edin had disappeared into. "I'm happy for you, Hunter." His tone was sincere, and it made me want to reach out and force him into a hard hug.

"Thanks, man." I cleared my throat when my voice came out a little hoarse. "We'll come with you to the Tennessee base," I added. "Well, as close as we safely can. We'll get you there safe." I swallowed, my throat closing up just a little. "I'm gonna miss you, you asshole."

Charlie let out a slightly choked laugh. "Fuck. I'm gonna miss you too, jackass. I can't believe…" He shook his head disbelievingly. "I can't believe we might never see each other again."

He looked over at me and exhaled. "Thank you for offering to take me to the base. I think I need some more time to… decompress before we start heading back, though." He shot me a wry smile. "You can't get rid of me that quick, Hatton."

My heart leapt. "Take as long as you need." My voice was too eager. "We can stay here. Or find somewhere else, but this is a pretty sweet spot to chill out in. You know, all things considered."

Charlie snorted, glancing round at the homestead. "Yeah." He looked at me, cool grey eyes so familiar. "I'll need to file a report when I do go back, though. I'll need to tell them something."

My lips drew into a grim line. I'd already thought about this. "Yeah. I guess… I guess you tell them I was killed in action." I shrugged, but just saying the words out loud sounded surreal. Almost dangerous, like I was tempting fate, even though I wasn't superstitious in the slightest. "Make it as gory as you want," I added to force away the ridiculous thoughts. "I was eaten by a monster or something. So there's nothing left of me."

Charlie looked ill at the idea. “Fuck, man, I don’t like that. But you’re right.” He paused. “It means you’d have to stay under the radar out here. So they don’t come across you.”

“We would, anyway. I wouldn’t risk them finding Edin.”

Charlie exhaled. “We’ll need to come up with an entirely new story, I think. If I tell them I was at the fighting ring and more officers *do* know about it…”

I felt sick at the thought. “Yeah. We’ll think of something. We have time. Pretty sure no one’s looking for us.”

Charlie nodded, looking tense and worried already. “And I won’t say anything that risks any of you. Edin. Danny. Even the Soul Eater.”

Gratitude welled inside me, and I reached over to clasp Charlie’s shoulder. “We’ll think of something,” I repeated.

Charlie exhaled and sat back. “Not right now, though. I don’t think I can cope thinking about all that shit.”

I huffed a laugh. “Me neither. We’ve got time.”

“Mmm.” Charlie gazed out at the back yard. The sky was deepening as the sun set beyond the forest, the horizon turning orangey red, making the tops of the trees look like they were on fire.

We sat in silence for a while. The longer I spent out here, the more I came to appreciate the Wastes. It was dangerous, but the wild nature of it was soothing in moments like this. Moments which weren’t possible in the cities or the military bases, both of which provided nothing but an overload of unpleasant sensory input. Too much noise. Dirty air and filthier buildings. Too many people, squashed together, living in misery.

I considered what it would be like, staying out here with Edin. Possibly going months and months without seeing another person. Only that big, overbearing purple guy for company.

Despite the pang of loss I was already feeling for Charlie, the thought sent pure pleasure shooting through me. I’d never been a sociable person, anyway. Truthfully, I kind of hated people. Except Charlie and Edin. And now Danny.

…Maybe Wyn when he was in a decent mood.

I wondered if Danny and Wyn would visit, or if we’d meet up with them at some point, and found myself actually looking *forward* to it. Shit, maybe some of Edin’s friendliness was rubbing off on me…

Nah.

I couldn’t deny, though, that excitement was starting to build up inside me now that I had truly made my decision. I didn’t know if Edin would want to keep travelling, keep wandering the Wastes, but if he was happy to stay put for a while… we could stay here. With some work, and a hell of a lot of upkeep, this place could be pretty perfect. There was plenty of game for Edin to hunt, and I’d already considered whether we might be able to catch some of the wild chickens roosting in nearby bushes to keep for eggs. There were the vegetables already growing here, and the huge cache of seeds we’d found. They were all wildly out of date, but it was worth a shot.

I tried to picture myself here, with Edin, growing food and hunting and just… being. Living freely, truly, for the first time in my adult life.

Suddenly, I couldn’t wait, and even the idea of returning to the military became unthinkable. How could I give all this up to go back to that grey, order-filled life that felt like a string of endless non-achievements and pointless tasks? Maybe my life out here would still be pointless and achieve nothing other than a hopefully comfortable existence, but at least it would be *mine*. *My* decisions. *My* choices.

And I chose Edin.

“So, we stay here for a little while longer?” Charlie asked, snapping me out of my thoughts. “You, me and Edin?”

I nodded. “I think so. Don’t you? I kinda like it here.”

It was an understatement. I already loved it here. I tilted my chin a little higher, enjoying the warmth from the last of the sun’s rays coupled with the breeze that smelled faintly of something familiar… It came to me a second later. Lavender. My grandma had grown tons of the stuff in her backyard. I remembered her telling me, every summer, that the bees loved it and that was why she grew it.

“Yeah, it’s nice here. Didn’t think we’d find *anywhere* nice in the Wastes.” Charlie chuckled. After a pause, he spoke again. “So if the purple guy is going to be sticking around, can you tell him not to walk around naked?”

I huffed with amusement. “Yeah.”

“And about that…” Charlie leaned back on his hands and shot me a shit-eating smirk. “Didn’t know you were a size queen, my man.”

I felt myself go bright red. “I swear to god, Charlie, I’ll punch you in the fuckin’ mouth if you teach Edin the term ‘size queen’.”

He snickered. “I won’t. But shit, you’re a braver man than I am, letting him near you with that thing.”

I let out a strangled sound, and Charlie chuckled. There was a pause before he spoke again. “I like you with him. You smile more.”

My face went hot. When I rolled my eyes, Charlie continued. “You do. You’re happier than I’ve seen you in a long time. Maybe ever.” He nudged me with his elbow. “You romantic sap.”

“Fuck off,” I muttered without heat, giving his shoulder a half-hearted shove.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

I was practically vibrating with the need to speak to Edin—to tell him I was definitely staying—by the time he got back from hunting. But first we had to cook dinner before it got totally dark. While we hadn't been disturbed out here yet, it didn't make sense to potentially draw the attention of anything or anybody by lighting ourselves up like a beacon with a fire at night.

We ate quickly. I could feel Edin's eyes on me as he sat with us, sharpening the short axe we'd found to cut firewood. When Charlie and I had finished, I told him I'd clean up in the morning, seeing as it was getting too dark to see much of anything beyond the glow of the fire. We extinguished the pit and Charlie said he was going to chill outside for a little while. I was pretty sure he just wanted to give us some privacy, and I was grateful, even though I double checked he had his flashlight and gun before we went inside.

Edin followed me up the stairs in the dark, silent house, the wood creaking under our substantial combined weight. I could feel the tension rolling off his big body. I knew he'd picked up on my jitteriness, and I wondered if he thought I was going to tell him that I was leaving with Charlie.

The moment we got into our room and Edin shut the door behind us, I spun to face him. "I'm staying," I told him, voice a little shaky with nerves.

Edin's big body went still. "Staying?"

I nodded. "I'm not going back. I want to stay." I swallowed. "With you."

I heard Edin suck in a breath, but he still didn't move for long moments—so long that I started fidgeting uncomfortably. I jumped when he took a step forward to close the distance between us and cupped my face in his big hands.

"Truly?" he asked, his deep voice tinged with tentative hope. "You want to stay with me?"

"Yes." My voice shook. I slid my hands down the sides of his muscular torso. "I don't want to leave you. I don't want to be without you."

"Hunter…" Edin's thumbs smoothed over my burning cheeks, and I heard the rasp of his skin over the scar-toughened tissue on my left cheekbone. "I know I asked this of you, but are you really sure? I don't…"

He shook his head. “I don’t like the thought of you giving so much up for me.”

“The only thing I’ll miss is Charlie,” I told him. “But he understands. And I… it’s not about giving anything up, scratch. With you, I’ve… I’ve gained something more than I ever thought I’d have.” I stepped closer, until our chests pressed together, dislodging Edin’s hands when I buried my face in the base of his neck. I slid my hands around him and gripped the flanks of muscle framing his spine. “*You’re* what I’m not willing to give up.”

“Hunter.” Edin’s voice was a low, intimate rasp, throbbing with emotion. A big hand stroked down the back of my head, and I felt warm lips brush the top of my ear. “You do not know what it means for me to hear you say that.”

He gently urged my face up to kiss me, his mouth hot and demanding. I kissed him back eagerly, tightening my grip, and soon urgency was rolling through us both. It took hardly any time for Edin to get naked, and then he was stripping me and backing me onto the bed, following me down.

I was already panting, heart hammering in my chest as he dropped frantic kisses between my pecs and down my abs, nuzzling the trail of hair with a hungry sound.

“W-wait—” I managed to get out, half sitting up to reach down and run a hand over Edin’s hair. I moaned between gritted teeth when he lightly licked the head of my rapidly hardening dick. “Scratch, let me get the prosthetic off first—”

“I’ll do it.” Edin leaned back, sitting up between my spread knees, and began removing it with deft, gentle fingers.

I let out an impatient sound, embarrassment heating my face. “Sorry,” I grunted, watching as Edin carefully placed my prosthetic beside the bed. “Not very sexy. Kind of kills the mood, huh?”

“Gah.” Edin waved a dismissive hand before he pulled off the sock on my stump. A second later, he was crawling back up the bed, over my body, with a wicked grin on his face. “Everything about you is sexy, my Hunter,” he murmured when he reached my face, before he kissed me hard.

I let out a grunt, excitement swirling low in my gut, making my cock jerk eagerly. I kissed him back, but then I was suddenly being flipped over and Edin was yanking my hips back until they were high in the air, my ass totally on display. My face heated even as my cock got stiffer in a rush at being spread so wide in such a submissive, vulnerable position. But I

couldn’t deny that I fucking loved it. A weird, novel kind of blissed out acceptance spread through my chest, making it sink deeper into the bed as I panted into the pillow. Edin was in charge here. I just had to wait and see what he did next.

Edin rumbled out a pleasured sound as his palms smoothed over my ass. He urged my knees wider apart and leaned down to drop a hot, open-mouthed kiss at the base of my spine.

“Mmm.” I shivered, going hot all over at the feel. I heard Edin shift on the bed, and then his velvety tongue suddenly licked over my hole in a surprisingly soft swipe. “Oh f-f-fuck,” I rasped, a hard shudder rolling through my body.

It was something I’d never felt before, and it was so erotic that my cock pulsed wildly with a spurt of pre-cum, my balls clenching. Edin growled against me and swirled his tongue, making my chest start to heave with my panting breaths.

I was distantly aware that I was moaning like an overworked porn star. I may have even been drooling. Edin was stripping me of all control of my body, taking away my agency, and I loved it. Pleasure pounded through me, making my toes curl against the sheets and my hands clench into tight fists around the pillow.

“Fuck,” I practically whimpered, too aroused to be embarrassed. My chest was heaving against the bed. I buried my face in the pillow to try and muffle the sounds, but I couldn’t stop the slew of grunts and moans leaving me as Edin’s tongue drove me out of my mind.

When he trailed the tip of it down and lapped at my balls, my thigh muscles clenched up so fast and tight they spasmed. “*Ungh,* shit, Edin.”

He let out a low rumbling sound and drew one of my nuts into his mouth, sucking gently. Then the other. I let out a low, guttural moan as my cock jerked into the air, dripping pre-cum onto the bed in a thin, steady stream. When Edin drew back after scraping his fangs over the curve of my ass, making me suck in a sharp breath, I didn’t even have time to protest before he was circling my rim with a fingertip.

I froze, then melted into the bed when he sank it inside. “Shit, yeah.”

“Mm.” Edin leant down to drop a brief kiss between the dimples at the base of my spine. “So hot inside, josdo.”

I couldn’t answer, too busy panting through the slight discomfort—that confusing mixture of pleasure and pain that made my brain blank out—

when he withdrew and returned with two fingers.

Edin grunted, his free hand smoothing over the curve of my ass before splaying over the small of my back. “And tight,” he rumbled, applying slight pressure so that my hips tilted back even further, opening myself up more to his touch.

By the time he withdrew three fingers, long minutes later, and I heard him slicking up his cock, I was shivering with anticipation. I panted hard into the pillow, my brows pinched together. “H-hurry up.” I aimed for a demanding tone, but it came out as a plea.

Edin let out a soft sound of amusement. A moment later, I felt the hot, hard length of him sliding over me, applying the slightest pressure to my hole. I flexed back into it needily, and shuddered hard when Edin’s wide cockhead nudged my hole, looking for entrance.

I bore down, breathing out, and gritted my teeth hard as the tension broke and he sank inside, groaning low behind me. The pain was sharp and fleeting, and I relished the feel of it, my body already primed for what was to follow.

I could feel Edin’s hot gaze on where we were joined as he steadily sank his cock deeper, his big hands splaying over my ass, long fingers digging in and keeping me spread wide. The feel was erotic as shit. I’d never been so vulnerable in my life, spread obscenely and pinned by Edin’s big cock.

My eyes rolled back in my head when Edin’s hips met my ass and his balls rubbed lightly over mine, every inch of him inside.

He grunted out a deep sound. “I’m going to fuck you hard, josdo,” he told me, his words making my sac tighten.

The fact that he was calling the shots—telling me to essentially lay there and take it—was the hottest thing I’d ever heard, and something I hadn’t known I’d wanted—or needed. I’d always been in control before when it came to sex, because of my size and general domineering nature. But I was melting into the bed already, brain blissfully blank, hot pleasure welling inside me as my cock throbbed.

What made it even better was the fact that I knew, deep down, that if I wanted Edin to slow down, or go gentle, or stop entirely, he would. I trusted him implicitly, which was something I’d never had with a sexual partner. Certainly never enough to let myself be put in this position before.

My legs trembled wildly when Edin started to move, his cock gliding in and out in slow, steady thrusts at first. He tightened his grip on my ass when

he started thrusting harder. And harder. Soon, he was pounding my ass so hard I had to reach up and brace against the headboard, unable to stop the desperate, guttural moans escaping me with every thrust.

Edin was grunting, his skin burning hot where it touched mine. His huge hands finally released their death grip on my ass, sliding down and round to the front, to the crease where my thighs met my hips. He curled his fingers and used the grip to pull me back into his thrusts, forcing a cry from me before I could stop it.

The sound of our skin smacking together filled the room, alongside Edin's low growls and my panting moans. I was overheating, hot shivers making me tremble, pushing my forehead into the bed. My cock pulsed, hanging between my spread legs like a steel rod, jerking wildly with our rough movements.

My breath caught in my throat when I felt Edin lean down over me on all fours, caging me in with his big, hot body, hands resting either side of my head. "You're taking it so well, josdo," he rasped in my ear, and I nearly came on the spot just from his words.

Edin must have sensed it—probably from the way my ass spasmed around his dick—because he chuckled and nuzzled my neck. As he grazed his fangs over my skin, one hand moved to slide down my front, over my tense abs.

My breath left me in a rush when he grabbed my aching dick. "Oh fuck."

"Mm." Edin dropped a hot kiss on the bend of my neck. "So hard."

I lost it when he started stroking that big hand up and down my cock, faster and faster until he was matching the speed of his pounding hips. I was moaning out nonsense, trembling, hands restlessly fisting the sheets, then trying to reach back for Edin's hair.

Hot, liquid pleasure poured through me, filling me up, igniting every nerve ending in my lower body. My cock was throbbing in Edin's fist, nuts drawn up tight. My moans got more urgent when the pleasure started spiking, my dick getting even harder, my legs shaking as my orgasm rushed up on me.

I groaned like I was dying when Edin pulled back before I could tip over the edge, so close I could taste it. I was a shivering, sweating mess when he flipped me over like I weighed nothing, jacked my knees up and out, and pushed his cock back inside in one hard, fast thrust.

I choked out a moan, then shuddered hard when Edin's hands grabbed my wrists and pinned them to the bed either side of my head. I barely managed to lift my head and peer down between our bodies when I felt his sinewy tail wrap around my left thigh and keep it spread wide.

"Oh shit," I moaned at the sight of Edin's big body between my spread thighs, his cock tunnelling inside me. I was pinned down. Totally helpless. My cock pulsed between us, painfully hard and dripping and aching for Edin's hand again.

His hands were occupied, though. I struggled a little against Edin's hold, but not because I actually wanted to get free. I was so turned on by the fact that he was strong enough to hold me down—that I truly couldn't break from his grip—that it was making me lose my mind. Edin was in total control of my body. My pleasure.

God, how had I gone this long without realising I'd love this so much?

"Fuck," I moaned, brows pinched as I looked up at Edin pleadingly. "Edin—I need—S-stroke my dick—"

My cock flexed between us, as if trying to entice him, flushed and hard as steel and leaking everywhere. But Edin shook his head, even as he stared at it with gleaming, hungry eyes. "You don't need it, josdo."

"I do," I practically wailed. I pushed up against his iron grip on my wrists again, but couldn't budge them even an inch. It just made my dick throb harder. "I'm so—f-fucking close—"

Edin rumbled out a low sound and leaned down to kiss me, thrusting his tongue deep, invading me thoroughly. His hips picked up speed, pounding his cock into me faster and harder until I had to wrench my mouth free from his kiss to suck in a shuddering breath.

The glide of his cock over my prostate was unrelenting, making my hips jerk up into Edin's pounding thrusts, my thighs gripping him tighter to make sure he kept fucking me exactly like that—hitting it just right every single time— "Unngh, *fuck*," I gritted out through my teeth.

I lunged up as much as Edin's grip on my wrists would allow to crush my mouth to his. Our tongues fought for dominance for a few seconds, but I was more than happy to let Edin overpower me, his tongue plunging deep. I could hardly breathe, both of us panting hard. The kiss got messier, more aggressive, our teeth clashing and biting. The bed was shaking precariously but the solid wood frame had proven sturdy, managing to hold our combined weight over the last couple of weeks. It didn't let us down now,

even when Edin's hips started moving like a jacked up piston, forcing a rough cry from my throat.

The tell-tale signs began. My nuts pulled up tighter to my body. My thighs shook uncontrollably, still wrapped around Edin's muscular torso, holding on for dear life. Pleasure pounded out from my prostate into my nuts, up my shaft, making my whole body throb.

When my cock started pulsing, I sucked in a trembling breath, something almost like panic welling in my chest. I was about to come, without any stimulation to my dick. It had never happened before, and the sensation was almost too much—too overwhelming—but I couldn't get free from Edin's grip. I was spread obscenely wide and trapped under his big, hot body, and fuck it was so good and I was going to come so hard—

"Sh-sh-shit, Edin—" I almost sobbed, and then everything exploded inside me. My cum didn't shoot out of me in hard jets like it normally did. This was long streams of white that flowed onto my stomach like a fast-moving river, endless and more intense than anything I'd ever felt before. I was shuddering, unable to catch my breath, cock pulsing and pulsing as my prostate just kept shooting starbursts of pleasure throughout my entire body.

"F-f-f-fuuuuck, Ed-d-din…" I strained out, my legs shaking around his middle. My head craned back into the pillow, the tendons in my neck so tight they felt like they might snap.

I felt Edin's warm lips and tongue suck at the bend of my neck, fangs worrying the skin. "You are perfect, josdo," he snarled against my skin. "Look at you. You're coming *so hard*."

His words just made it even worse, making my breath hitch on something close to a sob as a fresh, weak stream of cum pulsed out and trailed down the side of my stomach. I was quaking, my prostate too sensitive now, making me grit my teeth. Edin finally let go of my wrists and I immediately snapped my arms around him, holding on too tight.

"En-n-n-ough," I stuttered out, even as my fingers dug into the hot skin on Edin's back, holding him to me. I didn't think I could take anymore, but at the same time I didn't want him to stop. It was too much—my prostate was still pulsing with pleasure, being relentlessly tagged by Edin's cockhead. "P-p-p-please—Edin—"

He snarled viciously into my neck and jerked his hips forward one last time. I jolted when I felt his cock kick hard inside me, followed by

incredible heat. “Oh fuck,” I moaned, crushing my mouth to his hair, the length of his horn pressing against my cheekbone.

We were both sweating, still breathing hard as sated quiet filled the room. I could feel Edin’s strong heartbeat thudding against my chest, gradually slowing alongside mine. I tightened my arms around him and kissed his temple, just beside the base of his horn, a rush of hot emotion making me want to never let go.

Edin’s cock flexed inside me, making me grunt. He chuckled and carefully slid free. “Was I too rough, josdo?”

I shook my head straight away. “No, that was…” I exhaled, my body melting into the bed, “fucking perfect, scratch.”

Edin rumbled out a low sound and kissed my neck before sitting up. He helped me into the bathroom where we cleaned up in the dark. Edin laughed, the sound deep and wonderful, when I yelped and complained about how freezing cold the water was.

When we climbed back into bed, I curled my body around his, burrowing into his warmth. His pec was so hot and smooth beneath my cheek.

We lay in contented silence for long moments. I was drowsy, blissed out and my body completely relaxed for what felt like the first time in years. Edin shifted under me to drop a kiss to the top of my head, and the movement made the moonlight catch briefly on the pendant resting in the hollow of his throat.

I trailed my fingertips up to touch it lightly. “Have I ever asked you about this?”

Edin’s fingertips touched mine briefly before he trailed his hand up and down my arm. “It was from a bowl my mother had made,” he said. “It was the only thing I could find after the rycke attack that I knew with certainty belonged to her.” His big shoulder jostled me as he shrugged a little. “I wanted to keep something of hers. To remember where I…” He stopped. “Just… to remember.”

Pain pierced through the satiated pleasure haze. I slid my hand down his front until it rested over his sternum. “I’m sorry, scratch.”

“Don’t be.” Edin kissed the top of my head. “It was a very, very long time ago, Hunter.”

“I know, but… I bet some things feel the same no matter how much time passes.”

Edin was silent for a moment. “Yes,” he eventually murmured. “They do.”

He exhaled hard and scrubbed a playful hand over the back of my head. “Anyway, josdo. You distracted me with your beautiful body before I could ask. You spoke to Charlie.” He hesitated. “You have decided not to go back.”

I smiled against his chest. “Sorry, scratch. You’re stuck with me.”

He chuckled. “It’s what I want more than anything.”

My heart melted. “Me too.”

Edin was quiet for a moment. “And what about Charlie?” he asked, sounding a little wary.

Sadness trickled through me, but I’d made my decision, and I knew Charlie understood. “He’s going back,” I told Edin, then remembered what I’d said to Charlie earlier. “We’ll have to be careful, but I told him we’d take him to the Tennessee base—as close as we safely can, anyway. Is that okay?”

Edin grunted an affirmative. “Yes. We will get him there safely.” He paused, and I felt his muscles tighten a little beneath my relaxed form. “Are you sure you do not wish to go back with him, josdo? I wouldn’t—”

“I’m sure, scratch.” I rubbed my hand low over his belly. “I want to be with you. And I love it here.” I stilled, suddenly unsure. “Unless you don’t want to stay here? I don’t mind, but we’d have to be careful about the military coming across us. I know you’ve liked wandering—”

“I have only travelled constantly around the Wastes because I had no reason to stay in one place,” Edin said, trailing his fingers up and down my spine, making me shiver with pleasure. “Now I do. It is peaceful here. It will be nice to stay here. To settle.”

Warmth bloomed in my chest. “Yeah. It will.”

“Is there anything worrying you about staying out here?” Edin asked, hand stilling on my back. “Anything that you are apprehensive about? I know you have been in the Wastes for many years, but it is very different for the humans who are not under military protection.”

I was painfully aware. While, for the most part, the military and raiders left each other alone, I’d heard horror stories about the military targeting individuals or whole camps for their own reasons, which were usually unbeknownst to lower level soldiers. Raiders had vanished from their beds in the night. Whole camps had suddenly been deserted, with no trace of the

raiders who'd lived there. One of the reasons they wore masks was so it was harder for the military to target individuals.

I wasn't overly worried about that, though. I knew it was tough out here, but I could handle tough. I'd had plenty of experience roughing it in the Wastes, sleeping outdoors, fending for myself in the wilderness, thanks to the nature of Charlie's and my duties. But I knew it was going to be a very different experience living like that day-to-day without the comfort of knowing it was temporary. Before, I'd been able to deal with our stints surviving out in the Wastes because I'd known that soon I'd be back at the base, sleeping in my own—admittedly tiny—room in a heavily secure, guarded building surrounded by a tall fence and manned watchtowers.

Out here, the only thing separating us from everything in the Wastes was a fairly flimsy wooden door. Still, I couldn't find it in myself to get overly stressed about it. Edin and I had handled our fair share of shit already, and I knew that we would have each other's backs if anything did come for us out here.

I considered Edin's question—whether there *was* anything worrying me about staying out here. "There are some things that could become an issue," I admitted. "What about medicine? Or like… if something happens to my prosthetic? There are supplies I need—"

Edin waved an imperious hand. "Do not worry about *things*. I can get you things. I know people—monsters and humans—who can get you almost anything."

"Huh?" I propped myself up on one elbow and stared down at him. "You *know people*? What are you, a monster mob boss?"

Edin rumbled out a deep laugh. "I just know people. I talk to people. I help them. So they are willing to help me in turn."

I rolled my eyes and lay back down, resting my cheek on Edin's smooth, warm pec. "That still sounds like a mob boss. You call in favours from people who owe you." I slid my hand down his abs. "How can they get you anything you want?"

Edin shrugged his big shoulder slightly, jostling me. "There are ways into many of the cities."

My stomach dipped. "What?" I said, lifting my head to look at him. "Seriously?"

"Yes."

“But…” I licked my lips. “The cities are the only refuges from the monsters.”

Edin let out a humourless snort. “They haven’t been for a very long time, Hunter.”

Panic flared through me at the thought of monsters pouring into the cities. Everyone was so tightly packed together in there, it would be impossible to flee if a rampage started. “We need to tell someone. Maybe Charlie can tell—”

“Hunter.” Edin palmed the back of my head. “It is not your worry.”

I gritted my teeth. “People could get hurt. You said someone was bartering for information at the fights about a secret passage into a city—”

“I just told you monsters have been in the cities for a long time. Have you ever heard of a monster attack in a city? Have you ever heard even the slightest *rumour* of a monster in a city?”

“Well… no, but—”

“So most are not there to hurt humans, Hunter. Truthfully, the majority of monsters do not want to harm humans. Just as the majority of humans do not want to harm others. But it is always the ones who do that you hear about. Yes?”

Ugh, I *hated* when Edin spoke sense. “I guess,” I grumbled.

“There will be some who have bad intentions, yes,” Edin said. Just the sound of his rumbling voice was already soothing some of the stress flaring up inside me. “But they are the exception. So do not make this your worry. You make everything your worry.” Edin’s deep voice was affectionate. “Relax, josdo. Do I need to make you come again?”

I snorted a laugh, suitably distracted. My dick made a valiant effort to show its interest, twitching against Edin’s hip. “Give me a few more minutes, then we’ll revisit that.”

But I listened to him. He was right. This wasn’t my fight—not everything could be. I exhaled and settled back down, resting my head on Edin’s chest, fingers idly tracing the grooves of his stomach.

“So,” I began, returning to the previous topic, “what do *I* owe you for your help then, scratch?”

“Mm.” Edin rumbled out his low sound and drew me tighter against him, until I hitched my leg up over his hips, caging him in with my limbs. I didn’t even flinch when his big hand trailed down past my knee and over

my stump, cupping it in an absentminded gesture. “You owe me nothing, my Hunter. We are even. You have given me much in return.”

My heart swelled, but I couldn’t think of anything to say in response that would sound even half as good as that. So instead I just kissed his chest, over the steady thump of his heartbeat, and held him tighter.

“But you can pay me back in blowjobs, if you want,” Edin said a moment later, his voice sly.

I sighed. “Way to ruin the moment, scratch.”

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EDIN

I'd been in this world for a long time now, but I still found humans odd. I was sure I always would—even the one who made my chest ache with fierce, sweet pleasure every time I saw his handsome face.

I folded my arms over my chest, cocking my head as I watched that human do one of the many human things I found so odd.

"What did you say this was called, again?" I asked, even though I remembered. Seeing Hunter's beautiful golden eyes roll in exasperation always made affectionate amusement warm my chest.

He stopped moving old, dry grass from one big pile to another with a three-pronged metal stick that he'd found with a load of other things he called garden tools.

"Composting," he told me in his low, raspy voice that always sent pleasure shooting deep in my belly. I loved his voice almost as much as his strong body and his beautiful, interesting face. "It means we'll be able to grow food."

Charlie approached carrying a big sack, which he upended over the grass pile, dumping out even more of the stuff. He and Hunter had found a rusted old scythe. After I'd sharpened it for them, they'd started cutting down some of the dry grass in the field beyond the house for this very purpose.

The big, plastic bin in the yard that Hunter had said was for *composting* had been bleached from years of sitting in the sun, and was so brittle that a big chunk had snapped off when he had lifted the top off. Luckily, they had found another stored in the shed that was still useable.

I grunted and waved a hand. "I will find you food."

Hunter shot me a grin, reaching up to wipe the sweat from his forehead with the back of his wrist, leaning on the long handle of the garden tool. "I know, scratch, but I can't live on game. Humans need vegetables."

In the six weeks we had been here, he and Charlie had made many changes to the homestead. Charlie's father had been a farmer before, he'd

told me, so he had a rudimentary knowledge of some things that Hunter claimed would make our lives much easier out here. Things like this composting, and growing food. Hunter was even talking about catching some of the wild chickens that were everywhere out here, roosting in bushes, to keep for their *eggs*. I had shuddered at the thought. He was squeamish about eating creatures from my world, but would happily eat *eggs*?

Like I said—humans were very odd.

Despite his strange little ways—which, truthfully, I found endearing—pure bliss still shot through me at the thought of Hunter staying with me. It was fragile, the hope still tentative, but every day that passed loosened the knot of worry in my chest. Hunter seemed happy. He seemed like he really *did* want to stay with me, even thought it would have to be out here in the Wastes.

I still worried that he would change his mind when the time came for Charlie to return to the military, but I tried not to think about that too much. Hunter had assured me that he *did* want to stay with me, but I was too used to loss to truly shake off the expectation of it taking yet another thing from me. And I knew the loss of Hunter would gut me in a unique way, when it did eventually come. Whether that was to be days, or weeks, or years from now.

I shook off the melancholy and grinned back at him, knowing he liked seeing the peek of my fangs when I smiled—almost as much as he liked the feel of them scraping lightly over his skin. Heat sparked low in my belly at the thought, and I couldn't help but run my gaze lower down his big, beautiful body.

"Mm." I quirked a brow at him, my grin morphing into a smirk. "It looks like hard work. You should take off your shirt so you don't overheat."

As Hunter rolled his eyes again, Charlie huffed and dropped the empty grass sack on the ground. "And that's my cue to take a break. I'll be round the front."

He bumped my arm with his fist as he passed. Charlie had been wary of me at first, though I maintain that his unease came mainly from jealousy at the thought of having to share Hunter's attention for the first time. I now understood it was not in a romantic way, but I knew that they had been a duo for a very long time. And then I came along and stole Hunter away.

I couldn't bring myself to feel guilty for it.

Once Charlie had vanished round the side of the main house, I shot Hunter a predatory grin and stalked forward. His lips twitched, the scar on the left side of his face pulling. He stabbed the prongs of the garden tool into the earth, so it stood on its own, as I approached.

"I'm all sweaty," he protested when I reached him and immediately wrapped my arms around him, slipping my hands beneath the hem of his t-shirt and running them up the length of his warm, sweat-dampened back.

"Mm," I rumbled. "Yes. I like it, josdo." I leaned in to nuzzle his neck, inhaling the mouthwatering smell of him. Like sun-warmed air and good memories, overlaid with the primal scent of clean sweat from his hard manual labour. It triggered my deep-seated instincts to fuck and protect. To hunt for and feed this man. To take care of him in all ways.

Hunter chuckled, hands smoothing up over my shoulders to wrap around my neck. I loved the feel of his strong arms caging me in, holding me close. "Don't distract me, scratch," he said, but followed it with a kiss to my temple, near the sensitive base of my horn. "Besides, you *could* help instead of just standing there watching."

"I only just got back from hunting," I protested, but didn't overly care about his admonishment. Still, I lifted my head and nodded in the vague direction of the four rabbits I'd strung up closer to the house.

Hunter grunted. "There's something messed up about how much the thought of you hunting for me turns me on. Seriously, what's with that?"

"You like me taking care of you," I purred, leaning in to nuzzle the scar on his cheek. He never even noticed when I did it anymore, so comfortable now compared to the way he'd flinched that very first time I'd touched it.

Hunter huffed and gently knocked the back of my head with his knuckles. "So arrogant."

"You love it, josdo," I rumbled with a grin, expecting Hunter to protest half-heartedly, like he normally did, pretending he didn't enjoy me bossing him around.

He didn't, though. Instead, his throat bobbed as he swallowed, fingers twisting anxiously in my hair. "Yeah. I do," he rasped, voice hoarse. He swallowed again, and his face went pink with an endearing flush. "And you. As well."

I cocked my head. "And me?"

Another nervous bob of his throat. He parted his lips to speak, then closed them again, then parted them. "I love you," he said in a rush, the

words running together, making me take a second to process them.

When I did, my heart thudded hard in my chest. My tail flicked aggressively in sharp reaction, instinctively wanting to wrap around Hunter's leg or waist to keep him tethered to me.

I wondered for a moment if love was different for humans. If he meant something different by it. For me, it was an overwhelming sensation in my chest that swelled so big when I looked at him, or breathed him in, or lost myself in his beautiful body. It was a bone-deep instinct to keep Hunter safe. To keep him fed and warm and happy. To do anything, risk anything, to see those things happen.

It was knowing that the pain of losing him, when it did happen, was worth the time that would precede it. Because it would happen; I would outlive him, as much as the thought filled me with bone-crushing despair. But in some ways, I felt like that knowledge made me love him even more.

I hoped that Hunter felt something similar for me. I hoped that was what he meant when he said he loved me. But in the end, I supposed it didn't overly matter if our ideas of love were not perfectly matched. They were enough.

"And I love you, my Hunter," I said. I pulled him closer and kissed him, deep and hard, showing him how much I meant it.

When we eventually broke apart, long moments later, Hunter licked his lips. I loved that dazed blink he always did after a long kiss, like it took him a moment to recover from it. It made me want to take him inside and show him just how much I loved him in the cool darkness of the room we had claimed as our own. I still could not believe that I had a place in this world that was mine—mine and Hunter's. I'd had no place, in any world, for so long.

Even though my insides were thrumming with pure happiness, I couldn't help but tease my human—just a little. "So, you love me enough to stay out here with me, josdo?" I asked, reaching down and curving my hand over his firm backside. "Eating your mushed up grass compost food out here in the Wastes?"

Hunter burst out laughing, the sound deep and raspy. "You don't eat the compost, scratch." His cheeks were still flushed, and his amber eyes gleamed with the same giddy joy that was bubbling inside me. "But yes. I love you enough to stay out here." He tightened his arms around my neck. "There's nowhere I'd rather be."

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Author’s Note

Thank you for reading Edin and Hunter’s story. I hope you enjoyed it—and I hope it was nice revisiting Danny and Wyn, and seeing Wyn finally exact his vengeance on Danny’s tormentor. He’s a bit of a drama queen, so obviously he had to make it a show of blood-soaked poetic justice.

Edin isn’t quite as ghoulishly mysterious as Wyn, but I think that’s a good thing. He still has a hidden side, and he masks it behind his arrogant, brash personality. Edin *is* a happy creature at heart. Quick to laugh, sociable and eager to help people. But he still carries plenty of pain and trauma. People tend to underestimate him and assume he has very little substance. Hunter did just that at the beginning, before he came to realise that Edin wasn’t just a big, happy-go-lucky lavender dude who likes annoying wayward soldiers. I hope I was able to convey just how deeply Edin feels things, and how his past experiences motivate him.

I get the feeling that Hunter will be a bit of a divisive character. He’s a grump and a hard-ass, and *way* too tense when he first meets Edin. He does loosen up, and he is admittedly under highly stressful situations for most of the book, so I hope you are able to cut him some slack. He’s also fiercely loyal to those he cares about, and secretly a little bit of a submissive marshmallow (but only with Edin), so I love him. Especially because he’s socially awkward and his jokes always fall flat. He’s a big, bad-tempered, impatient asshole who likes to get shit done, which makes him a little reckless (and makes me love him even more). But most importantly, Hunter will defend Edin to the ends of the earth, and will champion that purple dude more than anyone else.

For this book, I took in the notes from some reviews that mentioned implausible aspects of the Wastes in Book One: old cars running, expired food being eaten, and so on. I tried to make sure that these elements were more believable in this book, because these were very valid critiques—I may have let my artistic license extend a little too far, and I don’t like the thought of details like that jarring anyone out of the story.

I also tried to address the issue of conflicting life spans, which was also brought up by readers of Book One. It may not be the answer that some of you want to hear but, yes—Edin and Wyn will outlive Hunter and Danny. They aren't actually immortal—just very long-lived (and super hard to kill), but they will certainly outlive them. However, that was intentional. I know some stories like to create ways for humans to become immortal, so that they can stay with their immortal lovers forever, but I didn't want that. Love is precious and terrifying precisely because it has a shelf life. I love the thought of these monsters learning how overpowering this can be when they know that the time they have with their humans is not particularly long, so cannot be taken for granted. Especially in a place like the Wastes, where life is more dangerous anyway.

I should also briefly mention the other big character in this book, despite how little he actually appears: Charlie, Hunter's best friend. Some facts about Charlie: he's from Texas. He's 30, just like Hunter. He hums songs by the *Mamas and the Papas* when he's anxious. He will not be staying on the homestead with Edin and Hunter. If you were wondering, Charlie is getting his own book. It just won't be for a while—there are several others ahead of his in the queue.

Cat was a character who made himself known as I was writing the fighting competition scenes. The more I wrote of him, the more I started warming up to this unbeatable, mysterious fighter who still has just enough softness left in him to help a stranger—especially when that stranger is Hunter, who isn't exactly the friendliest dude. So maybe Cat will get his own book, too… I definitely have his story forming in my head now. We'll see.

What's next?
Remember that camp of "half-decent" raiders back in Nebraska that Edin was going to take Danny to? We're heading there in Book Three, to finally see how 'the other half' live out in the Wastes.

And we'll finally be meeting the rycke. Specimen zero-zero-one to the military. The monster that Wyn told Danny to run from if he ever came

across it. The one who is the same species as the creature that wiped out the remainder of Edin’s entire race.

Fun!

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Monster Index

Soul Eater (species name: unknown): One of the old races. Only seven remaining, including Wyn. Humanoid, single-gender species that is born from eggs. Has the ability to dissipate into thick black smoke; can travel great distances this way. This ability is obstructed by behamots, whose rock-like skin sends vibrations that prevent dissipation. 001 at the military's Nebraska base. A species that does not need to eat, drink or sleep.

Appearance: Tall, rangy muscular build. Pale, greyish white skin. Long fingers with black-stained tips. Black, curling horns that have jagged edges. Prominent brow bone and flat, bridgeless nose; sharp cheekbones. Thin, raised ridges across the curves of the forehead and cheekbones. Very sharp teeth.

Wyn is completely covered, head to toe, in scars. He has one pure black eye, and one that is white with just a tiny pinprick of a pupil. Long black hair. He typically wears heavy black boots, black pants, a loose black shirt and a long, grey coat with a ragged hem and a hood that conceals his face.

Isdernuc [*iz*-der-nuck]: One of the old races. Edin's species, but he is the only one left after a rycke killed the rest of the last remaining tribe more than 5,000 years ago, when Edin was still an adolescent. Humanoid species. 002 at the military's Nebraska base. A species that does not need to eat, drink or sleep.

Appearance: Close to seven feet tall, with six-inch-long horns that curve up over the forehead. Pale lavender coloured skin. Extremely muscular. Long, prehensile tail with sharp tip. Dark purple hair and eyes, which are bigger than a human's and have much bigger irises. Craggy, intense demonic features. Fangs.

Edin wears a black kilt that ends just below the knee, heavy black boots, and a metal pendant on a leather strap around his neck, which is the last remaining item of his pack's that he owns—it is a piece of a metal bowl his mother made. Part of his right horn gets snapped off in Book Two, leaving the end of it jagged. He doesn't need to sleep, but he likes to—it energises him.

Parasite (species name: unknown): A parasitic monster that infects humans. They are the same species as Wyn; he can detect them, so he destroys them to stop them wiping out humanity. Capable of injecting deadly venom through its bite as a defence mechanism when threatened or a nest is attacked.

The life cycle of a parasite is as follows: a hatching will crawl inside the mouth of an unaware human—usually while they are asleep—and into the digestive system. The human will, at this stage, start feeling somewhat ill as the parasite begins consuming all of the nutrients in the body as it prepares to lay its eggs. Once the eggs are laid in the stomach, the parasite uses its sharp teeth to escape the stomach; it expels a glue-like substance that it uses to 'patch' the tiny tear it has made in the stomach lining so that the host stays alive long enough to incubate the eggs. The parasite will then latch onto the spinal column to control the host's brain activity and keep the host functioning as the eggs incubate. During this time, the parasitic eggs continue to absorb nutrients through their permeable linings, causing the host to lose weight rapidly, weaken and eventually become too ill to function. When the eggs are ready to hatch, the host will expel them from the stomach and die, the parasite dying alongside it. The eggs then hatch and go off in search of new hosts.

Queens live in nests, laying eggs. A queen produces a thick jelly that creates the environment the eggs need to incubate outside of a host. She is normally tended to by worker parasites, which are bigger than normal parasites, and bring the queen food and tend to the eggs when they are ready to hatch, sloughing off the queen's jelly.

Appearance: Full-sized parasites at the end of their life cycle are about the size of a small rabbit. Dark, scaly skin. Twelve legs, thin and spindly and covered in hard bristles. Flat face with wide eyes like a housefly that curve around the sides of its head. Circular mouth with sharp teeth.

The parasite spawn expelled by a host is a thick, grey mucus, with the darker eggs visible. Hatchlings are tiny versions of adult parasites—about the size of a bumblebee.

Worker parasites are bigger—about the size of a small dog.

Queens are huge—car-sized—and shaped more like a tick, with a thinner thorax and a fat, bloated abdomen that is usually swollen with eggs. Two dozen legs with sharp ends that she uses as weapons.

Behamot [*bee*-ya-mott]: Described by Edin as ‘tough, but not particularly smart’. Very hard to kill—the only ways of destroying them are to push them off a great height, causing their rock-like skin to shatter, or to set them on fire. A species that eats and sleeps. Meat eaters.

Appearance: Around seven-and-a-half to eight feet tall. Dark grey skin that is pebbled and rough like stone; basically impenetrable and as hard as rock. Squashed face with big tusks jutting up from their lower jaw.

Encountered by Hunter, Charlie, Edin and Wyn in Book Two. Also encountered long, long ago by Edin and Wyn when two behamots were taunting the Soul Eater about squishing his head under a big boulder, and Edin showed up to help—ripping his own arm off in the process.

Borolesh [*bohr*-oh-lesh]: Large, gentle species. Move on all fours. Pale skin the colour of sand that is wrinkled and hairless. Droopy, sagging faces. Three long, curving horns protruding from their bald heads. Long arms.

Observed in Book Two by Hunter, Edin, Danny and Wyn, pulling an RV at a distance.

Forileun [fohr-*il*-ee-yun]: Invertebrate species. Secretes a poison from its claws that amplifies pain receptors to incapacitate its prey.

Appearance: About seven to eight feet tall on all fours. Four legs that are segmented and covered in hard bristles, ending with small claws that let it grip. Long, thin body (shaped, as Hunter describes, ‘like an ear of corn’) covered in dark bristles over a shiny exoskeleton. Long, curving neck and low-hanging face. Rectangular, vertical black eyes that wrap over the top of its head. Blunt, thick teeth.

Encountered by Hunter and Charlie in Book Two.

Aytorin [ay-*tohr*-in]: One of the old races. Humanoid species. Fairly introverted, with not many left. Speak an ancient language that holds power; knowing an aytorin’s true name grants control.

Appearance: Tall and bipedal. Grey, mottled skin.

Encountered in Book Two by Hunter, Edin, Danny and Wyn, chained to an RV being pulled by two borolesh. This aytorin has a cage on its head, and is dragging a huge war hammer.

Karik [*kah*-rick]: A creature that looks like a large, land-walking squid—just with more legs and much bigger beaks. Their suckers can rip skin clean off the muscle. One rips Edin's leg off when he is young, and Wyn comes across him and helps him. This is how they meet.

Kerenis [keh-ren-iss]: Creature that hunts and feeds on anything warm and living; constantly searching for meals, which it smothers before consuming. Next to impossible to kill.

Appearance: Black blob-like monster that moves by rolling its body over itself in a constant undulation. Its underbelly is covered in teeth and ringed by thick black fronds that let it sense vibrations and movements from nearby creatures.

Encountered by Danny and Wyn in Book One.

Koleb [*koh*-leb]: Fairly primitive species that travel in big packs via tunnel networks that they dig. Known for their pilgrimages where the tribes meet to offer the best sacrifice to their god, in exchange for plentiful harvests and bountiful young. A species that eats and sleeps. Vegetarian.

Appearance: About four feet tall. Greenish-grey skin. Thin with spiny, hunched backs. Long arms that end with two long, clawed fingers. Long, floppy ears. Big mouths filled with shark-like teeth.

Encountered by Hunter and Charlie in Book Two.

Mortik [*mohr*-tick]: Invertebrate species. Opportunistic hunters that lure their prey in by camouflaging themselves depending on their surroundings. Some have adapted since coming to the human world. Nocturnal.

Appearance: Described by Hunter as a 'cross between a beetle and a scorpion, but the size of a cow'. Six segmented legs. Long tail with extremely sharp stinger that secretes acid-like venom. Head that mimics a human face; small black eyes and open mouth with a long, thin black tongue that it tastes the air with due to poor vision.

Seen briefly by Danny in Book One; encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two in the tunnels.

Myrm [muhrm]: Big, worm-like creatures the size of a horse, covered in dark hair. Six short legs. Long, curving neck. Blank face with a wide slit for a mouth and two tiny black holes for eyes.

Described by Edin to Hunter in Book Two. A myrm is the reason Edin was caught by the military and became specimen 002. He came across one that had been trapped by the military and was freeing it when they tranquilised him.

Rycke [reek]: One of the old races, but not long-lived. Humanoid species. 001 at the military's Nebraska base—the first monster specimen the military captures. Feared by almost all other monsters. Described by Edin as 'unfathomably powerful—a dichotomy of unlimited violent rage and a peaceful, gentle nature'. Do not like causing harm, but become unstoppable when pushed to their limit. Fiercely protective by nature. Gain strength with age.

Appearance: Huge black, sinewy wings. Dark, bird-like feet.

Observed by Danny at the military's Nebraska base in Book One; mentioned by Edin in Book Two.

Wanuk [wah-nuk]: A monster-world creature, about the size of a small pig, that resembles a large naked mole rat but with a beak instead of teeth, and six long, thin legs that end in sharp points.

Edin hunts one for Hunter and Charlie at the homestead in Book Two, but they decline to eat it.

Unknown: Short, wide female monster with yellowish-green, wet-looking skin. Lightbulb-shaped head with no discernible neck. Four long arms that end in three thick, tentacle-like fingers. Long, thick, dark green, rope-like strands protruding from her head that move independently. Flat face; thin lips and no nose—just two slitted nostrils. Long, thin eyes with horizontal pupils.

Encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two; one of them mans the sign-up table at the fighting competition. She hits on Edin and Hunter gets bratty about it.

Unknown: Tall, gangly monster with 'freakishly long' limbs (according to Hunter) with an extra joint. Covered in coarse brown hair.

Encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two; one of them guards the front prison entrance where the fighting competition is held. Nosy. Bit of a creep.

Unknown: Humanoid species. Tall, hulking monster with leathery tan skin that's hairy in places. Thick, clawed fingers. Beady black eyes. Big tusks that distort his lower lip.

Encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two; he is the lover of the fightmaster at the fighting competition.

Unknown: Humanoid species. Big, muscular monster with pale grey skin covered in scars. Thick, dark mane of hair that extends down its back.

Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, at the fighting competition. It is chained up, and being forced to fight by another small, wiry species of monster with six arms.

Unknown: Humanoid species. Tall. Predatory and graceful. Long hair.

Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, pacing in a cage at the fighting competition.

Unknown: Tall, wispy pale monster, dressed in long dark robes. Moves like it is almost floating. Long fingers. Featureless face except for two small dark eyes.

Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, at the fighting competition. It is the owner of the human fighter who Charlie goes up against.

Unknown: Troll-looking creature. Pebbled, mustard-colour skin.

Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, at the fighting competition. It is the owner of the human fighter who Hunter has to fight.

Unknown: 014 at the military's Nebraska base. Slender female monster. Blue-black skin. White hair that floats around her head. Sharp teeth.

Observed by Danny in Book One in her cell.

Unknown: 008 at the military's Nebraska base. Described by Danny as 'the stuff of literal nightmares'. Skin like old leather. Long arms and fingers; hands with extra knuckles. Rows of solid black and white eyes that ring the entire front half of its head, blinking sporadically. Gaping mouth crowded with needle-sharp teeth.

Observed by Danny in Book One. It appeared to be in agony and constantly raging in its cell before it vanished one day under classified circumstances.

Unknown: 007 at the military's Nebraska base. Tall, slender humanoid species. Non-gender-specific. Pale grey. Angular yet flat face with alien-like features and big dark eyes.

Observed by Danny in Book One, standing in the centre of their cell, unmoving.

Unknown: Female monster species. Sunburnt red skin. Long arms and legs. Small, open ring of tentacles for a mouth. Two thin slits for nostrils. Circular black and white eyes.

Encountered by Danny in Book One, as the leader of the small pack that try to take Danny. Destroyed by Wyn.

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About the Author

Lily Mayne writes what she loves to read: achingly sweet yet gritty romances against unusual backdrops—dark, futuristic, dystopian and more. She currently lives in the UK with her husband and several fluffballs, who like to make a lot of noise while she's writing.

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